

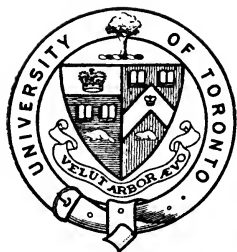
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Her Ladyship's Conscience.

Ellen Thorneycroft
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VERSES WISE AND OTHERWISE
LOVE'S ARGUMENT, AND OTHER
POEMS

(And in collaboration with her husband)

KATE OF KATE HALL

HER LADYSHIP'S CONSCIENCE

BY

ELLEN THORNEYCROFT FOWLER

(THE HONBLE. MRS. ALFRED FELKIN)

AUTHOR OF

"CONCERNING ISABEL CARNABY," ETC.

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BOOK I

CHAPTER I

ENTER LADY ESTHER

"AND now, my dear Esther," said the Duchess, throwing off her furs and sinking down into an easy chair; "tell me exactly what sort of a man he is, and whether you and Mamma like him. I'm simply dying to know; and so is Tammy, if he would only tell the truth; but being a man he pretends he isn't, and sends me to collect news for him, just as if we were lions and jackals instead of husbands and wives."

Lady Esther Wyvern paused for a moment. Unlike her elder sister, she was one of those rare women who always think before they speak. Then she replied slowly: "Yes, I like him; I decidedly like him, and I think Mamma does, too. But he isn't a bit our sort, you know."

The Duchess nodded. "Probably not: but he'll be none the worse for that! Though Mamma will think he is," she added as an afterthought. "Now proceed to describe him."

"Well, in the first place he isn't at all good-looking," Lady Esther began.

"Then he *is* our sort. None of the Wyverns ever are good-looking. I always think we are a remarkably plain family."

"Oh, Eleanor! how can you say such things?" Lady Esther looked distinctly hurt.

"Because they are true ; and you are such a stickler for speaking the truth that I should have thought you would have enjoyed them. If Wilfred had been good-looking I could never have treated him as one of the family. I should never have believed he was a real Wyvern. The Wyvern blood may be pure, my dear, but it doesn't prevent the Wyvern faces from being plain."

"And he is decidedly clever," continued Esther.

"Again a true Wyvern ! I always have considered us clever. Papa was quite clever in his own solid mahogany, mid-Victorian fashion ; you are clever in your intelligent and rather governessy way ; and I am exceptionally clever for a duchess."

"But Wilfred's cleverness is of a different sort from ours."

"I don't see how that can be, since our clevernesses are all quite different from each other."

Lady Esther's brow was puckered with her effort to convey to her sister's mind a correct impression of their cousin. "But he is different again. He isn't like Papa, because he is extremely modern and up to date."

"Then he must be like me. I'm tremendously modern for a woman of my age and size. My one effort in life is to march with the times. I often march till I'm quite out of breath. I'm always urging Tammy to march by my side. It is the only hope for an aristocracy in these socialistic times."

Lady Esther's lip curled with scorn. "There is no hope for an aristocracy in these socialistic times."

"Oh yes there is ! if we only march : a hope of a certain kind. I'm not fussy, and I don't mind being disestablished, if only I'm not disendowed. But I didn't motor over here to talk politics with you, my

dear Esther : I came to hear all about Wilfred, and if he is a big enough man for the place. So do go on about him."

"I'm trying to go on, but you keep interrupting me. Well, Wilfred is modern and up to date in quite a different way from yours. He is in earnest about it. It isn't just a pose with him as it is with you. You see he is *really* young and fresh and enthusiastic, and believes in things with all his heart." Esther invariably sacrificed tact to truth.

The Duchess laughed her merry laugh. Nothing disturbed her good temper. "Thank you, my dear child. What a truly sisterly remark ! But I hope you don't mean that our beloved cousin is actually socialistic, and wishes to break up Papa's estate into small holdings, or something dreadful of that kind ! "

"Oh dear no ! He is very much in earnest, but it is quite the right sort of earnestness. He fully realizes the responsibilities of a great position, and is most anxious to render himself equal to them. He talks about being an earl just as you'd talk about being a clergyman, if you know what I mean."

"I see. That is certainly more like Papa than me. I never feel that being a duchess is at all like being a bishop ! But if Wilfred is that sort of a person, I don't wonder that Mamma has taken to him. She always loves earnestness, and a sense of responsibility, and things like that."

The subject of the two sisters' conversation was their distant kinsman, Wilfred Wyvern, who had succeeded, some six months previously, to their father's title and estates. The late Earl of Westerham left no son ; and his only brother, Colonel Wyvern—heir presumptive to the peerage and a widower with one son—died a year or two before the Earl, his son having

predeceased him by a few months. The next in succession was a distant cousin—so distant that the head of the family had never seen him; for the late Lord Westerham was the last man to be on friendly terms with a collateral who was hoping to step into his august shoes as soon as he should vacate them. It was a bitter disappointment to him that he had no son: and a real grief when his brother's son was killed in a hunting accident; and at the bottom of his heart he blamed his next heir for both these disappointments, and hated him accordingly. The late Earl was one of those fortunate men—men specially fitted to shine in political life—who can successfully shut their eyes to anything they do not wish to see. He did not wish to see Wilfred Wyvern: it seriously annoyed him that a branch of the family-tree, growing so far apart from the parent stem that its leaves had trailed in middle-class dust, should, owing to an unfortunate accident in the hunting-field, aspire to become the parent-stem itself: therefore for him that trailing branch did not exist.

The fourth Earl of Westerham had other valuable gifts in addition to his faculty for eye-closing; and one of the most valuable was absolute infallibility. He had never been known—in all his seventy-eight years—to own himself in the wrong, or even in error. That in itself was a great source of strength. People who are never in the wrong may be irritating to others, but they are a wonderful support to themselves.

There is an expression much used (whatever it may mean) that certain people are "Nature's gentlemen." In a similar way Lord Westerham was one of "Nature's clergymen." He was not an actual clergyman, any more than Nature's gentlemen are actual gentlemen: but he possessed all the typical and ideal

clerical attributes. He really was a good man according to his lights : and if his lights were but few, and those few carefully shaded by conventions and prejudices, it was not perhaps altogether his fault. Lord Westerham was by profession a peer, but by preference a lay-reader. He was never so happy as when presiding at public functions, which, at his touch, were speedily transformed into religious services. His speeches at prize-givings were in themselves a theological training : and bazaars were, so to speak, his oysters, which he opened with delight. He dropped into preaching, as Silas Wegg dropped into poetry ; and all his conversations finally ripened into sermons, as surely as blossom ripens into fruit. True, an untimely frost might nip them in the bud, as blossoms are sometimes nipped : but the living germ of a sermon lay concealed in his shortest utterances : and—in English society as at present constituted—a wealthy peer does not meet with more than his share of untimely conversational frosts.

The fourth Lord Westerham had followed his clerical inclinations even in the matter of his marriage ; and had taken to wife Cecilia, eldest daughter of the Right Reverend the Honourable Alured Henderson, Lord Bishop of Merchester, third son of the fifth Viscount Edmonton. As Countess of Westerham, Cecilia developed into a most perfect and finished product of the Victorian Age. She was a *grande dame* of the old school : but a *grande dame* translated into Evangelical English. The stateliness of the *ancien régime* was hers, without its frivolity : she possessed its grandeur without its gaiety.

With one notable exception, Lady Westerham performed the part of a good wife and a great lady to perfection ; but her one lack was a reprehensible one :

she failed to provide an heir to her lord's title and estates. But his lordship was far too excellent a man and too devoted a husband ever to reproach—even in thought—his wife on this score : he divided the blame of this regrettable omission equally between Providence and the heir-presumptive ; and his attitude was one of commendable leniency towards the former, and of distinct annoyance towards the latter.

The only children of this union were two daughters, who, unfortunately, inherited their father's plainness ; as the son, who never came, would probably have inherited his mother's beauty.

Eleanor, the elder, however, so successfully atoned for her want of beauty by her gaiety and common sense, that she captured (and, what is more wonderful, retained) the affections of the Marquis of Tamford ; and so became, when in due time her father-in-law was gathered to his ducal fathers, Duchess of Mershire. Though never a handsome woman, she was extremely pleasant-looking, and understood the art of dressing to perfection ; an art of which her mother—though a beauty in her time—had never mastered the rudiments. Though the fairies had denied to Lady Eleanor Wyvern the gift of beauty, they had endowed her plentifully with two almost as excellent qualities, namely, personality and charm : and that was the reason why she became Marchioness of Tamford and consequently Duchess of Mershire.

But the fairies who made up to Lady Eleanor for her want of beauty by two almost as excellent gifts, took no notice at all of her younger sister's christening. Lady Esther was a plain likeness of Eleanor, with none of Eleanor's redeeming points. In her case, Eleanor's merry blue eyes became a faded grey ; Eleanor's dark hair, a dull mouse-colour ; Eleanor's

bright complexion, a pasty white. In place of Eleanor's light heart, Esther had an overburdened conscience; and in place of Eleanor's ready wit, a slow and accurate tongue. Consequently while the elder sister secured the strawberry-leaves, the younger was left to wear the willow: and up to the time of her father's death—when she herself was forty years of age—Lady Esther Wyvern had never had a lover.

But if Eleanor had still the more prepossessing face, Esther surpassed her sister with regard to figure. In accordance with an almost universal rule, the younger sister was considerably taller than the elder; and while the Duchess had acquired a certain matronliness of form, Esther still retained her girlish slenderness. Also, Eleanor's hair being dark, it was beginning to be shot with silver; while Esther's mouse-coloured locks—as is usual with hair of that hue—could not as yet boast a single grey hair. Therefore, although there was only five years' difference in the sisters' ages, there appeared to be more, since the Duchess looked her forty-five years, while Lady Esther looked decidedly less than her forty.

But the great difference between the late Lord Westerham's two daughters lay not in their outward appearance, but in character. While the elder was an ordinary, cheerful, good-tempered woman of the world, the younger was the raw material out of which saints are manufactured. Esther Wyvern hid behind her somewhat uninteresting face a really beautiful nature. In fact her spirit was of such inherent fineness that her virtues hardly seemed virtues at all, but just natural attributes. It appeared—to other people as well as to herself—impossible for her to behave otherwise than as an angel. And this, of course, was rather hard on her, as it is on all persons who have the credit

of unusual amiability : actions which in others are lauded to the skies, in them are taken as mere matters of course. How delighted we all are if a usually disagreeable person happens to be pleasant to us ; it is to us as snow in summer : while the amiability of the habitually urbane is no more to us than daisies in springtime. In fact, we trample upon both equally.

Lady Esther possessed one of those abnormally sensitive and exasperating consciences which ought by rights to be supplied with blinkers : instead of which her strict early training had fitted it with magnifying-glasses. Hence the tragedy of her life. Had she, in the days of her secluded youth, now and again evaded the parental eye (as Eleanor did), she might have had the excitement and delight (as Eleanor had) of ineligible and surreptitious lovers. But she was always scrupulously filial both in the spirit and in the letter, and declined to indulge in any pastime which had not, so to speak, been licensed by her father. In fact she obeyed her parents as implicitly as Eleanor (when Eleanor had the chance) disobeyed them. Yet Eleanor had plenty of delightful and unsuitable love-affairs when she was a girl, and secured a devoted and ducal husband when she was a woman ; while Esther travelled her forty years in this mundane wilderness without having any love-affair at all, and was regarded by her parents with that half-tender, half-contemptuous affection, which the children of men generally mete out to their unwooed daughters.

Immediately after the late Lord Westerham's death, his widow and unmarried daughter went to the South of France for the winter ; and the new peer was established at Wyvern's End before they returned to England in the early spring to take up their permanent abode at the Dower House. Naturally, they had seen

a good deal of him during the first few days after their return; and now the Duchess of Mershire—who had returned with them from Mentone—had just motored over to learn the result of their investigations.

"Now go on, Esther," she urged; "tell me more about Wilfred. I shall never dare to go back to Tammy unless I can tell him every possible detail about the new Westerham. He is positively athirst with curiosity. Men really are inquisitive creatures, and yet they pretend that we are."

"But aren't we?"

"Of course we are; but nothing like as inquisitive as men. And we never pretend not to be, which is where they are so trying." The Duchess's language often was involved, though her meaning was generally clear.

"I wonder you married a man, considering what a poor opinion you have of them," remarked her sister, with gentle irony.

"But, my dear, what else was there for me to marry? And you know it would have been against my principles to remain single. I always think singleness is extremely bad for women, it makes them either fussy or conscientious."

But Esther had all the admiration of the spinster for the opposite sex. "I never think you appreciate Tammy, Eleanor; he really is a most unselfish husband."

"My dear girl, an unselfish husband is one who invariably wants his own way, but always expects his wife to pretend that it is hers. Tammy has been most awfully kind all to-day saying he knows how much I must want to see you and Mamma, and arranging for me to motor over and do so: and yet all the time what he really means is that he wants to know all

about Wilfred, and expects me to come and find it out for him. I know my Tammy."

"But after all you must remember who he is, Eleanor; he has been accustomed always to have his own way."

"Of course, I remember he is a duke. If I hadn't, I shouldn't have married him—or, at any rate, Papa and Mamma wouldn't have served him up for me so tastily, and rammed him down my throat. But, all the same, I'm very fond of Tammy: make no mistake about that. And when I'm not, it isn't his dukiness that irritates me—it is his ordinary manliness. And he can't help that, poor dear! He was born a man, and he has got to go through with it."

"I wish you wouldn't say things like that about Papa and Mamma," remonstrated Esther; "I don't think it is dutiful."

"Well, at any rate, it's true. Of course, Papa and Mamma were always very religious people: but they were always very worldly as well."

"Oh, Eleanor, don't!" Esther looked scandalized.

"Why not? I don't think any the worse of them for being worldly. In fact, all the better, as I'm the one who has profited by their worldliness. I think as people get older they ought to get a little more worldly, just as they ought to get a little stouter. Unworldliness and thinness are all very well on what is called the sunny side of thirty, though why it should be considered sunnier than the other side I've never been able to find out; but in middle age one has to put on the world and the flesh to a certain extent. It is more becoming."

Esther shook her head. To her devoted spirit such talk was sacrilege.

"Now if Mamma hadn't been rather worldly," the

Duchess continued, "and put her foot down once and for all, I should have probably married that nice-looking curate I was so much in love with when I was twenty : don't you remember him ? I forget his name, but he had bulging eyes and leanings towards spiritualism. He used to say he got messages from either Cardinal Wolsey or John Wesley—I forget which, but I know it was some great religious celebrity whose name began with a W—and I used to pretend to myself that I believed it, but of course I never really did."

"Didn't you ? I think I should have liked to believe it."

"Oh, my dear Esther, what nonsense !"

Lady Esther was so accustomed to have her thoughts and words condemned as nonsense by her home circle, that she never dreamed of rebelling : she merely tried to explain. "I mean that it would be helpful to me to believe that those who have gone before are still in communication with us, and interesting themselves in our affairs."

"Well, I can tell you I didn't want any Wolseys or Wesleys interesting themselves in my affairs : it was bad enough to have Papa and Mamma doing so, and spoiling all my fun ! Though, of course, I am glad now that they did, or else I might be married to my little curate, and buried with him in some awful country parish."

"He might have been a bishop by now if you'd have married him," suggested Esther.

"Not he ! Too cranky and spiritualistic for a bishop. He wouldn't have been at all suitable to rule over a see, though he was quite perfect for kissing over a stile."

"Oh, Eleanor ! how can you say such things ?"

"Because I think them, and I can't stand humbug. I enjoyed making love to my little curate, and I'm not ashamed to own it, even though I'm a duchess and a mother and all the other respectable things. And I enjoyed nothing more in the whole affair than thinking my heart was broken when Mamma found it out, and had him carted off to some other parish. I've never enjoyed anything more than that broken heart: though, of course, Mamma didn't know that I enjoyed it, but talked to me all the time as if I'd got a toothache or a bilious attack. I think it is a great mistake that I haven't any daughters, because I should have understood them so much better than Mamma understood us."

"I don't know about that. You'd have understood them if they had been like you; but if they'd been like me, you wouldn't have understood them any better than Mamma did."

"But why should they have been like you?" the Duchess rattled on. "Family characteristics don't descend like the knight's move in chess. No: where the trouble would have come in, if I'd had any daughters, is that they might have been like Tammy: and though I adore him as a husband, I couldn't have stood him as a daughter. He'd have driven me wild! Tammy is delightful as a duke, but would be detestable as a *débutante*."

Lady Esther had not a keen sense of humour: but the idea of her cheery and worldly-wise brother-in-law as a *débutante* made her smile. "You understand the boys all right," she remarked by way of consolation, "so why not be content with them?"

"I am content with them: I think Tamford is a duck, and Archie a perfect darling. And, of course, I understand them, because I always understand men."

"I'm not sure about that. I don't think you always understood Papa."

"Yes, I did. At least I knew when I didn't understand him, which comes to the same thing. The women who really misunderstand men are those who think they do understand them when they don't. Now, with regard to Tammy: the parts of his character that I understand I mark with pink, like the British possessions on a map of the world, don't you know? And those are the only parts I bother about. The rest isn't in my territory, and I don't meddle with it."

Esther sighed. "If I had a husband, I think I should like the whole of his character to be marked with pink."

"Then it would be a faked-up business: that's all I can say: like those religious maps that have different colours for different religions. I remember Papa had one once to show the spread of Romanism, where the perverted countries were all marked scarlet, after the Scarlet Woman, and it looked for all the world as if the red-ink bottle had been upset over it!"

There was a moment's pause, and then Esther said rather shyly: "I remember the name of that curate who was in love with you: it was Whiteford." It was characteristic of the two sisters that, while it was Eleanor whom the curate had loved, it was Esther who remembered his name.

"Oh, Esther, how clever of you! And you were still in the schoolroom at the time. He used to lend me books all about spirits and things—I do remember that—though I never read them at all carefully. Have you ever noticed that people with fancy religions always lend you books about them, but people with ordinary religions never do? I hardly ever call upon

people who belong to a fancy religion without their lending me whole circulating libraries of books about it: but it never occurred to me to lend any of my callers the Thirty-nine Articles to take home with them."

Lady Esther looked thoughtful. "I suppose the real reason is that people with what you call fancy religions think things out for themselves; and therefore are much more vitally interested in the subject than the people who take everything for granted and don't trouble their heads about it."

"In the same way, people who are on the wrong side are always so much more enthusiastic than people who are on the right one. Little Whiteford was much keener on his cranks than he was on his dogmas; but he was a nice little creature all the same."

"And he had very nice eyes, Eleanor," Esther pleaded; "they weren't at all bulging."

"Yes, they were; they showed in his profile; and all eyes that show in a profile must bulge. But his was quite a nice sort of bulge, I admit."

"I remember his sermons very well: I used to like them," continued Esther dreamily; "they were out of the common, and made me think."

"I don't remember his sermons at all: I only remember his kisses, and they weren't at all out of the common."

Esther looked shocked: such matters were still as sacred to her as they were when she was a girl. "Oh, Eleanor, how can you! I don't think kisses are things to talk about."

The Duchess laughed merrily. "My dear child, there is no harm in talking about kisses that are five-and-twenty years old. It is only current kisses that ought not to be mentioned. If anybody kissed me

now I shouldn't talk about it : but nobody ever does ; and my candid opinion is that nobody ever wants to ! ” And she laughed again. “ By the way, I wish somebody would want to : it would make Tammy sit up ! ”

“ You asked me who Wilfred is like,” said Esther ; “ and I couldn't think of anybody at the time. But now it has struck me that he is a little like Mr. Whiteford used to be.”

“ Do you mean that he has bulging eyes, or that he kisses over stiles ? This is really interesting ! ”

Esther blushed to the roots of her faded hair. “ Oh no ! he isn't like him in that sort of way. I only mean he says things out of the common that make you think : just as Mr. Whiteford used to.”

“ Then I dare say it will go on to the stile business in time : if people are alike in one thing, they generally are in another ; and if it does, mind that you are on the other side of the stile, Esther. It would be a capital arrangement for both of you.”

Esther's pink blush became scarlet. “ Eleanor, how dare you ! Why, he is twelve years younger than I am.”

“ And little Whiteford was twelve years older than I was, but it didn't prevent our kissing at stiles. It was Mamma who prevented it : and I'm sure she wouldn't prevent you from kissing Wilfred.”

“ Eleanor, I hate to hear you say such things ! I hate to have such things said to me ! They are positively vulgar ! ”

“ English is vulgar, if you come to that ; the vulgar tongue ; but that doesn't prevent me from talking it, nor you from understanding it. It may be vulgar of me ; but I cannot help feeling that it would be the best thing possible for Wilfred to marry you. You know what a queer set he has been brought up in : all

among actresses and authoresses and queer, fascinating people of that kind; and think how dreadful it would be if he married one of them, and stuck her up at Wyvern's End in Mamma's place! I grant you that actresses and authoresses and clever people like that are much more attractive and entertaining than we are, and it would be far greater fun to marry one of them. But Wilfred's duty to himself and to his family and to the estate is to marry one of us, however dull it may be: and here are you ready to hand, and a Wyvern into the bargain!"

Poor Esther's blush grew so violent that it brought the tears to her eyes. "Oh, Eleanor, please don't!" she pleaded. "Wilfred isn't a bit your worldly-wise sort. Love and everything connected with it would be as sacred to him as it is to me."

"Another reason for marrying him: then you could talk about such things together on winter evenings, with your heads in the clouds and your feet on the fender. You'd enjoy it awfully; and you'd neither of you have an idea how funny you both were! Oh, here is Mamma!" and the Duchess rose from her seat, as a tall, white-haired, distinguished-looking woman entered the room and proceeded to embrace her elder daughter.

CHAPTER II

WILFRED WYVERN

SOME three years before the conversation recorded in the last chapter, a young man was sitting in his lodgings in London. The room was comfortably but plainly furnished: there were one or two good prints upon the walls, which were, however, mainly covered with books—poetry, novels, histories, essays, books of reference, and a fair number of volumes dealing with the most recent developments of speculative thought in religion and philosophy. For books were the tools of Wilfred Wyvern, who earned a modest but sufficient income as a journalist. He was tall and broad, with square shoulders and a fine physique. His hair was dark, his eyes were grey, and his complexion was inclined to be sallow. His face was undoubtedly plain, with a square nose, deep-set eyes, and rather a severe expression: but this plainness was redeemed from actual ugliness by a beautiful mouth, and his smile—when his face lighted up—was likewise beautiful. He was clean-shaven, according to the fashion of his day: and there was a curl in his thick hair which was distinctly attractive, as being a contrast—in its suggestion of frivolity—to the sternness of his face.

It was late at night, and he had just finished an article for *The Infallible*—a weekly journal whose editor, in his own estimation at least, always held the right views on every topic, political, religious or social, and who was never known to acknowledge that

he had made, or indeed could make, a mistake. To this journal Wyvern contributed with fair regularity an article on some literary or social topic : but whatever his opinion as to the general infallibility of *The Infallible*, he had no illusion as to his own. Yet he was young enough to believe in himself : he had his views on current politics : he was abreast of the times : was well read in modern books, and knew what men were thinking and saying. He was thoroughly in earnest, and enthusiastic in the propagation of his own ideas. He had not yet reached the stage of understanding that new books do not necessarily contain new ideas, or that new religions are merely old fallacies with new faces ; but he had thrown off the mantle of dogma which clogged the feet and impeded the progress of the generation preceding him, and had adopted the more fashionable and diaphanous mental vestment which is described as "an open mind." He was still young enough to think that he himself was right ; but he was also modern enough not to think that everybody else was wrong. With his whole heart he believed the Truth as it had been revealed to him, and was ready to die for it, should such an unlooked-for contingency ever arise ; but he was not prepared to consign to prison or to perdition those of his fellow-thinkers to whom another facet of the divinely cut Jewel had been shown. He knew that the one perfect chrysolite of Truth has many sides and many facets : he also knew that the finite mind can only see one of these at a time : therefore he did not doubt the correctness of his own spiritual eyesight ; but he allowed that other spiritual eyesights, which saw something quite different from what he saw, might nevertheless be as correct in their perception as was he. He did not attempt, however, to reconcile these seeming discrep-

ancies : he knew that such a task was far beyond his finite powers ; but he was content to leave that to the Great Reconciler, and to possess his own soul in patience meanwhile. His spirit was that of the Inquirer, rather than that of the Inquisitor.

Wyvern filled a last pipe before turning in, and picked up the evening paper, which as yet he had been too busy to read. He glanced over the columns of the paper in a perfunctory way, when his attention was fixed by seeing his own name. The paragraph was headed *Fatal Accident in the Hunting Field*. It appeared that Algernon Wyvern, the only son of Colonel the Hon. William Wyvern, had been thrown from his horse, and had died from the injuries sustained.

Wyvern whistled softly to himself. "By Jove!" he muttered, "that makes a difference!" It did.

Wilfred Wyvern was a collateral of the old family whose head was the Earl of Westerham. His father, a very far-off cousin of the present holder of the title, had been a major in the Indian Army, and was killed in a frontier skirmish soon after Wilfred's birth. Major Wyvern was by no means a rich man, and a considerable portion of his income died with him. As he had married a portionless girl for her beauty, his widow was left with but slender means. She had adored her husband, and her heart was broken by his death. She returned to England and devoted herself to the upbringing of her boy ; but she never recovered from the blow, and it was in a cheerless home and amid melancholy surroundings that Wilfred passed his early days.

Mrs. Wyvern was too proud to seek assistance from the head of her husband's house ; and as Lord Westerham—though sonless—was amply provided with a

brother and a nephew, it did not seem likely that Wilfred would even come within speaking distance of the title. So there was not any communication—nor any particular reason for such communication—between Major Wyvern's family and his far-off, titled cousins.

Mrs. Wyvern possessed distinct literary gifts. In her girlhood she had frequently sought the bubble reputation in the Poets' Corner of the local paper; after her marriage she contributed short stories—rich with local colour—both to English and Indian magazines: and in her widowhood she took to writing novels about Anglo-Indian society, which deserved—and earned—a considerable reputation. In this way she found some distraction from sad memories, and incidentally obtained a welcome addition to her small income.

Fortunately there was an excellent preparatory school in the seaside town where she settled on returning to England. Wilfred proved to be not only a healthy child, but also one gifted with brains. His curiosity was remarkable even in a child, and his questions severely taxed his mother's knowledge and powers of invention. He wanted to know the reason of everything—how this thing grew, how that machine worked, how another article was made. His quickness of perception and understanding were very great. Like other boys of an inquiring turn of mind he was sometimes a nuisance, the initials "R.S.V.P." being writ large all over him: nevertheless he acquired, while still young, a considerable amount of miscellaneous knowledge; and, better still, the habit of probing things, and not of meekly accepting their existence.

At school he showed considerable power of application, and made rapid progress. But he was by no

means a little plaster-saint in a niche. He got into a reasonable number of scrapes—but they were only scrapes. He was at times as mischievous as a monkey, but he had a healthy mind and escaped the contamination of serious evil. He was as fond of games as he was of lessons; and without attaining great excellence, was reasonably proficient at cricket and football.

In due time his mother was gratified by his obtaining a scholarship at a public school—not in the first rank, it is true, still a school of repute. Without this monetary assistance such a school would have been an impossibility for the widow's son. As it was, with that self-denial which is part of a woman's nature and which is the joy of a mother's heart, she was able, by the help of the scholarship, to provide the needful money. What it cost her to part from her only child, no one knew. But she steeled herself for the effort, and dulled her pain by devoting more time and energy to writing in order to enable her to give her boy extra pocket-money, and to hoard up a sum for the time when every penny would be wanted to send him to the University. For on a University career she had set her heart. Wilfred would have liked to follow in his father's footsteps by obtaining a commission in the Army. But apart from the fact that her husband's death on the battle-field made Mrs. Wyvern's heart turn cold at the idea of a like fate befalling her son, she literally could not afford to let him go into the Army.

Wilfred passed through his school career with credit. He worked his way into the Sixth and became a prefect at an unusually early age. But fortunately he didn't develop into a prig. He managed to scrape into the Eleven in his last year, and won the Mile at the Sports. He was not a bad speaker at the

Debating Society. He was at his best as editor of the magazine. One of the masters had discovered that the boy had a decided literary gift—inherited, doubtless, from his mother—and had taken him in hand. The said master was an admirable writer himself, and a merciless critic. Under his careful guidance Wilfred became a really good writer : his verses were decidedly above the average, and in his prose he showed that he had a distinct feeling for style. While he was editor the magazine had an excellence that is rare in school journals.

In due course Wilfred won a scholarship at Oxford : but his natural delight in his success was turned into bitterness by the death of his mother. Mrs. Wyvern lived long enough to know that her desire that her son should go to the University would be fulfilled, but was not fated to share the triumphs that she anticipated for him there. Her death was a terrible blow to Wilfred : there had been no warning illness, no perceptible failure in her powers ; but her papers revealed the fact that she herself knew well that she had serious heart weakness, and might die at any moment. She had carefully concealed the fact from her son, but had made careful preparation for the event. The little store of money she had accumulated, together with the scholarship he had won, was sufficient for his University career.

It was a sad beginning for what should be one of the happiest times in a man's life. To be for the first time more or less his own master ; to live in his own rooms ; to meet not only his old school-fellows but his peers from other schools ; to wander beneath the trees where Addison loved to roam ; to "walk the studious cloisters pale" ; to listen to the "pealing organ and the full-voiced quire," and "to have all heaven brought

before his eyes"—in short, to drink in all the magic and the beauty of that sweet city with her dreaming spires—what can a young man want better than this?

And to Wilfred this life began under the shadow of a great sorrow. He mourned deeply for his mother; but he did not allow his grief to interfere with his work, and gradually he recovered from the blow. He remembered that his mother had looked forward with pride to the success she anticipated for him at the University, and he determined that he would do his best to fulfil all that she expected of him, although it was a bitter thought that she would not share in his triumphs. Life would never be the same to him again; he would miss her smile and her encouragement. But her influence remained: her memory was not only an inspiration, but a safeguard in the times of trial and temptation that await a young man.

The four years at Oxford passed all too quickly. Lectures, debates at the Union, delightful evenings at the Musical Club, hard pulls to Iffley and Sandford Lock filled up the days. Wyvern read sufficiently hard to gain a creditable First in Classical Moderations, followed by a First in History in the Final Schools. But there his success ceased. He had engaged in too many pursuits; his reading had been wide but too desultory, so that no Fellowship crowned his Oxford career. He had, therefore, to give up any idea of the Bar. But he had won a decided reputation by contributions to the Oxford Magazine; so that when the termination of his scholarship and the rapid shrinking of the small store left to him by his mother made the earning of his daily bread a matter of practical and pressing importance, it seemed clear that he must go in for a literary career. And as the daily

bread had to be earned, it was even more clear that the literary career must begin by journalism. Wyvern might indeed have sought a mastership in a school; but somehow this idea was distasteful to him. So he packed up his books and his papers, took a modest lodging in London, and sought an engagement on the staff of some paper.

This was by no means easy to obtain. In these days few are the vacant posts and many are the applicants. Wyvern had before him some months of hard work and bitter disappointment. To keep body and soul together was no easy task. Sometimes an article was accepted—even then payment did not invariably follow.

One night, however, an acquaintance he had made, who had obtained some celebrity as a writer and was in touch with the newspaper world, happened to look in at his rooms. Wyvern was out, but his friend, Smedley by name, thinking he might soon return, sat down, lit his pipe, and picked up some manuscript papers that were littering the floor. Perhaps he ought not to have read them, but he did—with satisfactory results so far as Wyvern was concerned. When the latter returned some half-hour later, he was met with, "I say, Wyvern, who wrote this stuff?"

"If you must know," replied Wyvern, "I did. But it may as well go into the waste-paper basket."

"Confound the waste-paper basket! Don't you know that this is really good copy?"

"I thought so, certainly," replied Wyvern modestly; "but those confounded editors don't seem to agree with me."

"You may be pretty sure that no editor who is worth his salt has seen this stuff!" replied Smedley. "It's never got past some understrapper or other. Just let

me have some of this, and I'll see what can be done with it."

"You don't mean to say that you think you can get it printed?" cried Wyvern.

"Not only that, but the man I have in view will be glad to have it. Yes, and, like *Oliver Twist*, he'll be asking for more."

"No such luck!" replied Wyvern, with a shrug and a sigh. Fate had been hard on him lately, and he was getting hopeless.

However, Smedley seized on the papers, and with a good-natured nod went off with them.

He was as good as his word. Maxwell, the editor of *The West End Gazette*, was a friend of his: moreover, he was not a man who was content with work in a groove. He had a keen eye for good writing, and was ever on the look-out for new ideas and new men. At Smedley's instigation he read one of Wyvern's articles, and was much struck by it. Wyvern had somehow hit upon a new vein. His articles had a touch of originality and a certain quaintness and distinction of style which pleased the editor. He not only agreed to publish a series of articles by Wilfred, but also asked the latter to call upon him. The result was that Wyvern was placed upon the regular staff of *The West End Gazette*. At first he, of course, occupied a very subordinate position; but he had a salary, small indeed, but regular. As time went on his work pleased the chief, and Wyvern was given more responsible work with better pay. He supplemented this, as his name became known in journalistic circles, by writing for the monthly and weekly magazines, and soon he became a more or less regular contributor to *The Infallible*. He was now in a fairly good position, and could live comfortably.

During this time he had no communication with his relations. The Earl of Westerham had been informed of the death of Mrs. Wyvern, but had taken no notice thereof.

Wyvern had not taken much interest in the family pedigree. He knew that Lord Westerham had two daughters, and that his lordship's brother, Colonel Wyvern, had one son: and he was vaguely aware that his own father had been the next male representative of the family, and that therefore he himself was in the line of succession. But, curiously enough, the idea of inheritance had never occurred to him.

And perhaps this was not so curious after all, when one considers the atmosphere in which he lived and moved and had his being. We all of us measure things and people according to the standard of the world we live in, and of the dimension in which we exist; and Wilfred lived in a world where the claims of high rank and of great wealth were practically non-existent, but where the possession of intellectual powers and artistic gifts was rated at its highest value. The question, "Where did he come from?" was never asked in Wilfred's circle: "What has he done?" was the only inquiry that needed any answer. The sacred writings of his particular clique were not to be found between the scarlet boards of Burke's *Peerage*, but in the more catholic and eclectic pages of *Who's Who*. Like the rest of the world he bowed his knee to an aristocracy; but it was an aristocracy of brains and not of blood. And even the foundations of his own pride and self-respect rested not upon the fact that he was a possible earl, but upon the belief that he was a probable editor.

But when he read of the death of his cousin Algernon, the facts of the case were brought home to him.

It was unlikely that Colonel Wyvern would ever have another son: so that in the course of nature, unless anything happened to Wilfred, he was bound sooner or later to succeed to the title. Whether the estates followed the title he did not know. But it certainly made a difference: yes, it certainly made a difference.

It is but fair to Wilfred to state that any joy that he might have felt in seeing so prosperous a future opening out before him, was completely swallowed up in regret for the untimely death of the young cousin whom he had never seen. Like most of us, Wilfred had his faults; but, unlike many of us, there was nothing small or petty in his nature. Both physically and mentally, he was built on big lines: and the fact that he himself would eventually profit by Algernon Wyvern's fatal accident, in no way blinded his eyes to the tragedy of that accident, nor lessened his sincere distress and sorrow over it. But all the same he could not disguise from himself that it certainly made a difference. And the difference did not stop there.

Time passed on, and in less than a year Wilfred saw in the newspapers the death of Colonel Wyvern, the broken-hearted father having survived his son only a few months.

That made more difference still, as Wilfred was now heir-presumptive to the peerage.

But it did not make any difference in his relations with his noble relative; for by that time Lord Westersham's passive indifference to his many-times-removed cousin had changed into active dislike. Like Henry the Fourth, he found it difficult to forgive the man who was waiting to step into his shoes—which shoes, in his case, happened to take the form of a coronet instead of a crown, the aspirant being a complete stranger and

not his own son. But the principle was the same. Wilfred had, it is true, no chance of trying on the impending coronet ; nor was he the sort to avail himself of such a chance had it been offered to him ; but Lord Westerham felt as if he had found the ambitious youth pranking in it before the looking-glass, and detested him accordingly.

Time continued to pass on : and two years after Colonel Wyvern's death, the Earl himself was gathered to his august fathers, and Wilfred was called upon to reign in his stead.

And that made a very great difference indeed.

CHAPTER III

ENTER LORD WESTERHAM

"I AM very glad to see you, my dear," said Lady Westerham, embracing her elder daughter; "and how are Tammy and the boys?" The Duke of Mershire was known as *Tammy* by his intimate friends.

"Very well, thank you, Mamma. At least the boys were when last they wrote; and as Tammy has never referred to his inside for at least five days, I conclude there is no cause for anxiety. Men never make a secret of their ailments."

The Marquis of Tamford was now in the Guards, and Lord Archibald Oldcastle still at Eton.

"Esther and I are settling down quite comfortably here," said Lady Westerham; "it is really an excellent house, and a delightful garden. The gardens at Wyvern's End were always on too large a scale for me to feel that they were really my own; but here I can put on my garden gloves and potter about to my heart's content."

"I know: I feel the same about the gardens at Tamford. I should as soon think of gardening myself there as I should of gardening in Hyde Park; and I no more dare plant a flower in my own garden than I dare wash up a dish in my own kitchen. The deprivations of the rich are really very hard to bear!"

"Still the present Government is doing all in its power to lighten them," remarked Lady Esther, with her sweet smile; "I think you will admit that."

"Yes, the wretches!" replied the Duchess, sitting down on a sofa beside her mother.

"But you ought to approve of them," continued Esther; "you said you were marching with the times."

"So I am, but I never said that I liked marching: I only prefer it to sitting down in the middle of the road and being trampled to death. But I didn't come here to talk politics with you, Esther; I think it is the most dreadful waste of time for women to talk politics with one another. They have to talk politics with men—just as they have to play games with children—because men seem able to talk about so little else; but to do it with each other seems as absurd as to bring out a Noah's Ark in the drawing-room after dinner, and arrange the animals two and two."

"But I thought you said you liked men better than women," persisted Esther, who, for all her sweetness, was quite human enough to enjoy tripping up her more lively sister.

"No, I didn't. I said I understood them better, which is quite a different thing. And I'm not sure that even that was correct. I always know *what* a man will do, but I haven't a notion *why* he does it. When you come to consider the matter, the only really interesting subjects for conversation are dress and scandal: and for them give me my fellow-women!"

Lady Westerham looked grieved. "My dear Eleanor, I do not like to hear you say such things. Suppose Perkins or one of the footmen heard you—and they easily might, as they will be bringing tea in at any minute now—it would have such a bad influence upon them. I cannot bear foolish or frivolous conversations before servants, as I think one is responsible for the moral welfare of all the dwellers under one's roof."

"But I wasn't talking foolishly or frivolously before the servants, or even before the tea-things, as neither are in the room yet. And if Perkins and the footmen never hear anything worse than my conversation, they won't be led far astray."

"And that reminds me," continued Lady Westerham, "that Mrs. Brown told me this morning that some of the younger servants go to the Free Library at Severnashe and get novels from there to read. Did you ever hear of such a thing? I told her to put a stop to it at once."

"But they must read something, Mamma," pleaded Esther, "to rest and divert them after their work is done."

"I fail to see the necessity," replied Lady Westerham haughtily; "but if it is so, I will give them permission to borrow some of the books which came from the schoolroom at Wyvern's End and which are now in the workroom upstairs: *Ministering Children*, and *The Daisy Chain*, and *The Wide, Wide World*, and many others, which you two had when you were little girls."

The Duchess began to laugh. "And there was *Nettie's Mission*, and *The Golden Ladder*, and *Stepping Heavenward*. Oh, Mamma, how priceless you are! Think of Perkins reading aloud *Ministering Children* and *The Golden Ladder* to the footmen in the pantry after they'd washed up the dinner things! You really are as good as a play—a regular dress-piece, with a minuet in it, and wigs and swords."

"You are mixing up your dates, Eleanor," said Esther demurely; "minuets and wigs and swords aren't at all of the same period as *Ministering Children* and *The Daisy Chain*."

The Duchess fairly groaned. "If you begin worrying

about things being of the same period, you'll become insufferable ! There is nothing so tiring ! The last time we were at Tamford an artist person came over to see the gardens, and objected to something (I forget what) because it wasn't of the same period as something else (which I forget also), and I told him he might just as well object to apple-trees and potatoes being in the same kitchen-garden, because apple-trees were in the Garden of Eden and potatoes were invented by Sir Walter Raleigh. He'd no answer to that ! ”

“Hush, my dear ; they are just bringing the tea in,” murmured Lady Westerham, who was always devoured by the dread of what her elder daughter might say in the presence of her domestics.

But it was not the tea after all : instead of ushering in the tea-tray the butler announced “Lord Westerham.”

The man who entered the room, and was greeted by two of the ladies present and presented to the third, was the Wilfred Wyvern of the journalist's office ; but Wilfred with a difference. He looked older than he had looked then, and was infinitely better dressed ; and there was an assurance about him which had been lacking in his earlier and less prosperous days. The combined effects of the improved dress and the acquired dignity contributed to a decided increase in the good looks of the new peer ; and prosperity sat well upon his broad shoulders. His manners were—as they always had been—admirable, being thoroughly self-possessed, and yet free from the slightest taint of self-consciousness—the typical manner of the born artist. He was one of the few Wyverns—the Duchess being another—endowed with the indefinable gift of charm, and he possessed it in a marked degree.

By the time that Lord Westerham had been duly welcomed, the tea followed in his wake ; and Lady

Esther began to pour it out, and at the same time to pave the way for friendly relations between her sister and her cousin. Esther Wyvern was one of those absolutely unselfish people whose unselfishness is never noticed until it is removed: and may Heaven help those who are left to get on as well as they can without it! Her quick sympathies and her social gifts enabled her almost unconsciously to select a conversational platform whereon her companions for the time being could meet as equals. Had she been born in the eighteenth century instead of the nineteenth, she could have held a *Salon* with the best, being endowed with the sympathetic perceptions and the exquisite tact which make for perfection in such holding. She was not a great talker herself, but she could always make other people talk, and—what is more—talk their best.

Almost instinctively she knew the points of contact between her sister and Wilfred, and at once made for them. "Eleanor was just saying, when you came in, that she had no patience with people who were so artistic that they insisted on having their houses and their gardens all modelled and furnished according to the same period. What do you think?"

Wilfred, who might have been shy at this first meeting with his somewhat august and terribly outspoken relation, swallowed the bait at once: "I am afraid I must disagree with the Duchess: I confess I like to see everything harmonious and in keeping. I couldn't be happy in a room that was furnished half in Chippendale and half in carved oak."

The Duchess sighed. "Oh, dear, dear, how fussy of you!"

"Not at all," replied Westerham. "I'm sure you couldn't be happy in an early-Victorian dress and a Gainsborough hat."

"I couldn't be happy in an early-Victorian dress anyhow, because it is so unbecoming. But I could be radiantly happy in the Gainsborough hat without the dress—given, of course, that some other dress were substituted for it."

"Not if the dress were a modern Harris tweed, with a shirt-blouse?"

"That might possibly dim my radiance, I admit."

"Then you have proved my argument. Harmony is the essence of beauty. That is the whole point of having what are called regular features, features which harmonize with one another."

"Is it?" replied the Duchess; "I can't speak from experience, as I never had any. Wyverns never do."

"But that doesn't prevent our admiring the regularity of other people's features," replied Westerham, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Oh! yes, it does; or, at any rate, it prevents our admitting that we admire them."

"Eleanor, you do yourself an injustice there," exclaimed Lady Westerham, who always took everything *au pied de la lettre*; "I have always said that I never knew any girls so little jealous of other girls' beauty as my daughters. Even when you and Esther were quite young you were invariably generous about other girls' good looks."

"It is always easy to be generous with what you don't possess," retorted the Duchess; "I've often noticed it. The Vicar of Tamford is most frightfully generous with our money: much more so than we are ourselves. He sets us quite a good example."

Lady Westerham looked distressed. "My dear, you are doing both yourself and your husband an injustice now. I always consider—and your father thought the same—that you and Tammy regard your

wealth as a sacred trust, and treat it accordingly. It would greatly distress me to think otherwise."

Then Esther as usual came to the rescue. "Never mind what Eleanor says, Mamma: she is only trying to tease you and to shock Wilfred at the same time. She doesn't mean a word that she says."

"Who does, when you come to that?" retorted the maligned one.

Esther held her own. "I thought that you generally did; and that it was your pose to say what you mean and to mean what you say. You always say you hate humbug, and it is just as much humbug to pretend you are worse than you are as to pretend you are better."

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Westerham, glancing with approbation at Esther. "I think Esther has got you there, Duchess!"

"She has: I own the soft impeachment. That is where I am no true Englishman; I always know when I am beaten. But though I am beaten by Esther, I don't admit that I am beaten by you as well; I still stick up for the irregular Wyvern profile, and for the mixture of Chippendale with carved oak. I can't, for the life of me, see why everything should be *en suite*: it makes me feel that the world has been entirely furnished by Maple's in dining-room and drawing-room suites."

"I think," replied Westerham, warming to his subject, "that the reason why a confusion of periods is inartistic is that it isn't true, and I suppose we may take it as an axiom that beauty is truth and truth is beauty. Different periods were not coexistent with each other, and it is a sham to pretend that they were."

"But I contend that they *are* coexistent, provided that they are all past—just as part of a house that is standing to-day may have been built in the fifteenth

century and part in the eighteenth. Nobody objects to living in houses of that kind; *we* don't, and Stoneham is one of them. I shouldn't care to live in a house of which part was built in the nineteenth century and part in the twenty-second, I admit—at least not in the twenty-second century wing: it would be too cold for me, being at present unbuilt. I maintain that it is quite artistic to mix two pasts: it is only inartistic to mix a past and a future, because it is impossible."

"You are very ingenious, Duchess, and there is certainly something in what you say."

"Of course there is, because I am speaking the truth. In a sense, all the past is present; or at any rate can be fricasseed up for present consumption. Look how proud people are of having a nose that came into their family at the time of William the Conqueror, and an instep that was imported from the Low Countries in the reign of George the First; but I'll grant that they might object nowadays to being born with wings, which will be quite normal in the reign of Edward the Twelfth, or with ears ready equipped for wireless telegraphy of the time of George the Sixteenth."

"I think Eleanor's theory is rather nice," remarked Esther, "and that it is a comfort to feel that all the past belongs to us equally."

"Especially as only half the present does, and none of the future will," interpolated her sister; "at least, not to such of us as belong to the upper classes! Let us cling to our Plantagenet noses and our Hanoverian insteps, for they'll soon be all that's left to us of our ancestral possessions—and I dare say we shall have to pay death-duties upon them!"

"Eleanor," said Lady Westerham, "I never like to hear any one speak lightly of death. Pray do not do so in my hearing."

"I wasn't speaking lightly of death, Mamma, I was only speaking of death-duties, and not lightly at all : far from it ! And now, Westerham, tell me what you think of Kent in general, and of Wyvern's End in particular. I adore Kent, and I believe Stoneham is my favourite of all our houses."

The Duke of Mershire had four homes : a fortress in Scotland, a palace in London, Tamford Castle in Mershire and Stoneham Abbey in Kent.

"I feel quite a different character in each of our houses," continued the Duchess, as usual not waiting for the answer to her question ; "I am fierce and historical in Scotland, worldly and frivolous at Mershire House, practical and sensible at Tamford, and calm and religious at Stoneham."

"I should hope you are religious at all your homes, my dear," said Lady Westerham.

"So I am, more or less : but in London considerably less. And even the religion is different, at the different places."

"As how ?" asked Wilfred. "This is distinctly interesting."

"Well, I feel that the religion in the Highlands is the sort of religion that makes you want to pray at shrines, and the religion in Mershire is the sort that makes you want to give at collections, and the religion in London is the sort that makes you want to put on your Sunday clothes, and the religion in Kent is the sort that makes you long for the Millennium to begin at once."

"I know the Millennium feeling," said Esther, "I often have it when I look at that wonderful view from the top of Grotham Hill. Do you remember when we were children how we used to laugh at Mrs. Sherwood's *Henry Milner*, because he once said, when

asked what he would like to talk about, 'In such a beautiful spot as this, how can we talk about anything but the Millennium?' Of course, it was an absurd and unnatural remark for a child to make; and we, as children, naturally laughed at it. But now I see what the authoress had in her mind when she put such a remark into the mouth of a little boy: the idea was right, though the setting was wrong."

"Ah, my dear!" exclaimed Lady Westerham, "I am so glad to be reminded of that book, *Henry Milner*; it will be another excellent one to lend to the younger servants. I believe it is still in the old schoolroom bookcase that we brought from Wyvern's End."

"Mamma is full of a plan," the Duchess explained to Westerham, "for Perkins and Mrs. Brown to read aloud *Ministering Children* and *The Golden Ladder* to the footmen and housemaids in the housekeeper's room in an evening after dinner. She thinks they will all enjoy it."

"At any rate, it will be better for them than reading the trash out of the Severnashe Free Library," said Lady Westerham.

"Much better for them, Mamma; I never denied that. It was their enthusiasm that I doubted, not their improvement. But now," added the Duchess, turning again to Westerham, "tell me if you, too, adore Kent, and share the Millennium feeling when you look at the view from the top of Grotham Hill."

And then Wilfred proceeded to give her Grace as much as she would let him of his impressions of his new home and surroundings until it was time for her motor to be ordered and for her to depart.

After the Duchess had gone, Westerham turned to Esther: "Come out for a walk," he begged, "it is such a beautiful evening, and there is a touch of spring in

the air; just that early touch which makes us all agog with expectation of the summer that is coming."

"I know it; it comes when the bare trees have turned from black to a pinky brown, before they break out into green. Shall you mind being left alone, Mamma, while I go for a little walk with Wilfred?" asked Esther, the dutiful daughter. Esther never spoke of her cousin as *Westerham* in her mother's presence, for fear it might hurt the Countess's feelings to hear a comparative stranger called by her late husband's name. Such an idea had not occurred to Eleanor, and never would: that was just the difference between the sisters.

"Certainly not, my love," replied Lady Westerham, "you look a little pale, as if a walk would do you good. Eleanor is very good company, but I always think she is slightly fatiguing, she talks so much and passes so rapidly from one subject to another." The mother might admire her elder daughter most, but she loved the younger best: Esther had so much more in common with her parents than Eleanor ever had. "But you must not let my idle words give you a wrong impression, Wilfred," added Lady Westerham, fearing that she might be guilty of injustice towards her female Esau; "Eleanor is a most admirable wife and mother, and her kindness to all the poor people on the Duke's estate is beyond expression. I often feel rebuked when I compare my conduct with hers."

But Esther would not allow this. "Oh, Mamma, that is nonsense! Nobody could be kinder to the poor on the place than you have always been and still are; and whatever good there is in Eleanor has been inherited from and taught by you and dear Papa."

Lady Westerham rose from her seat, and placed a

caressing hand on her younger daughter's shoulder. "My little Esther is very good to me," she said to Wilfred; "her dear father and I always found her a child after our own hearts. I can truly say that from the day she was born until now she has never given us a moment's pain or anxiety. Eleanor is a good girl, but she is a little headstrong and wilful, and perhaps rather too fond of her own way. But she is very affectionate, and always so bright and cheerful." And the mother smiled fondly at the recollection of her daughter's high spirits. To Lady Westerham, the brilliant Duchess of Mershire was still a lovable and troublesome girl. Such are the delightful anachronisms of parents.

Having received her mother's permission to go out for a walk, Esther started with a light heart. It is more than a little pathetic to see how certain unmarried daughters of the risen generation never quite leave their girlhood behind. The daughters of the rising generation are not hampered in this way; they leave it—with all other forms of dependence—behind them as snakes cast off their outer skins.

But Esther Wyvern belonged to the Victorian type of maidenhood, which never really grew up until it was married, and which—if it never married—never really grew up at all. The shallow observer sees something ridiculous in the spectacle of a middle-aged woman still hampered by the limitations of a girl; but to the understanding heart there is something infinitely pathetic in the sight. For such a woman has lost her youth, and has gained nothing in its place. The garlands that bound her in her girlhood, bind her still; but the flowers on them are faded, and only the dried stalks and withered leaves remain. The dreams of youth no longer enchant her, but she has not awakened

to the realities of the morning ; she is still wandering in a misty twilight, uncheered by the radiance of dream-land or by the light of common day.

Of course neither Lady Westerham nor the Duchess understood anything of all this. To her mother Esther was still a girl, and to her sister she was an old maid, and neither of them had an idea that the tragedy of Esther's life lay in the fact that she was both. But Wilfred understood, and herein lay the secret of his intense fascination for Esther. This distant kinsman, whom she had never seen until a week or two ago, knew her and appreciated her as her own people had never known and appreciated her. And herein lay also Esther's attraction for him. He was conscious that his hand, and his alone, held the clue to the bower where the soul of Esther was concealed—that his eye, and his alone, could read the cypher which laid bare the secrets of Esther's heart ; and the mystery which no one but ourselves has solved is dear to every one of us.

We are all conversant with the common—but always strange—experience of meeting a stranger who sees our views and thinks our thoughts and talks our language as our own familiar friends have never been able to do. Some think that this is a proof that the stranger and we have known each other in a former existence, and are only renewing old and prehistoric ties ; some think that it is merely a sign of mutual affinities recognizing one another ; but whatever be the reason the fact remains that this sudden and inexplicable sympathy does spring into being between persons who meet each other for the first time, and this rapid mutual understanding had established itself in full force between Lady Esther Wyvern and the new Lord Westerham.

In spite of the fact that she was surrounded by loving

parents and an affectionate sister, Esther's youth had been a very lonely one. No one understood her, and as none of her circle had any idea that they did not understand her, no one attempted to do so. The Victorian Age had many excellencies, but it was not a subtle or a discriminating age. What was on the surface it saw, and what was not on the surface it did not believe existed. This limitation of vision saved it from certain errors and led it into others. Nowadays we have fled to the opposite extreme: we not only see all there is to be seen, but a great deal that there isn't. The Victorians did not perhaps pay enough attention to the feelings of the young; but we pay a great deal too much to their fads. The Victorians certainly underrated the loneliness of a girl who was misunderstood by her parents; but we just as certainly overrate the loneliness of a wife who imagines she is misunderstood by her husband.

But though Esther had lived so completely under her parents' sway that she had never yet developed an opinion of her own, but had merely assimilated theirs, she had, nevertheless, any amount of thoughts and ideas and dreams which would have been utterly incomprehensible to the excellent and prosaic Earl and Countess. She felt vague and formless yearnings after Something which she had never known, and yet which she had a subconscious certainty existed somewhere; Something which had nothing to do with rank, or wealth, or social distinction, but which haunted the woods in springtime, and hovered over the horizon of the distant hills; Something which dimly and intangibly contradicted the stern and narrow theology in which she had been reared, and which faintly hinted at things too beautiful to be dreamed of in its philosophy.

She had been trained to worship a stern and jealous God, Who put no trust in His servants, and charged even His angels with folly; Who overturned the very mountains in His anger, and laid burdens grievous to be borne upon the shoulders of men; nevertheless, unknown to herself (and greatly to her horror had she known it) Esther had raised an altar, in the inmost recesses of her heart, to an Unknown God—the God of Beauty and Joy and of all the glories of Nature, the God before Whom the mountains and the hills broke forth into singing, and all the trees of the field clapped their hands; the God Who stretched out the heavens like a curtain, and called all the stars by their names.

And this God, Whom she had so long ignorantly worshipped, Wilfred had been now sent to reveal unto her; and she was just beginning to recognize the message, and to realize the gospel which he brought. But—alas for her!—she was not yet ready to accept it.

While the new peer was being sampled by the quality in the drawing-room of Wyvern Dower House, he was likewise being commented upon at the upper servants' tea-table in the housekeeper's room, where Mrs. Brown was pouring out tea for Perkins, and for their two ladyships' respective maids. Mrs. Brown had been with Lady Westerham ever since her ladyship's marriage, with the exception of a couple of lurid years when the good woman so far forgot herself and her high calling as to enter into the holy estate of matrimony with Brown, the head coachman of that time. Before that interval her name had been Cozens, her condition single, and her calling that of first housemaid; after that short lapse, her condition had been changed to that of widowhood, her name to that of Brown, and her calling to that of housekeeper of Wyvern's End.

According to Mrs. Brown's own account, those two years had been to her an undeserved and an unendurable Purgatory, and the intervening decades had added to, rather than detracted from, her memories of misery. What the departed Brown's view of the matter was has not been recorded in history, so nobody ever knew whether Mrs. Brown gave a Purgatory as good as she got. For the last five-and-thirty years Brown had slept with his forefathers and his first wife in Wyvern churchyard, and his widow had surrounded herself with a sort of halo of bygone conjugal unhappiness. When the late Earl died, Mrs. Brown elected to accompany his widow to the Dower House, as did also Perkins, a retainer of equally long standing. They were both too old to tolerate the initiation of a new régime, or the regulations of a young master. So they stayed on with the widowed Countess, and carried out at Wyvern Dower House the domestic traditions of Wyvern's End.

Perkins was a bachelor, a condition of life which, in its own way, carried with it almost as much social prestige as did Mrs. Brown's unhappy marriage. He was, moreover, a man of means, and had saved enough to retire whenever he liked; but his devotion to what he called "The Family" was so intrinsically a part of his being, that to leave their service would have been to him as the bitterness of death. His life literally was bound up in theirs. The fact that he was a single man—and, moreover, a single man of means—greatly contributed to his popularity, and consequently to his comfort, in the housekeeper's room. By this time the women servants had reluctantly accepted and circulated the fact that "Mr. Perkins was not a marrying man," and each had forgiven him for not marrying herself as long as he did not marry one of the others.

He was rather like the country of Belgium on the map of Europe : as long as he remained an independent State, all went well ; but should any other country so much as attempt to annex him, there would immediately be war among the Great Powers.

The two maids who completed the *partie carrée* at Mrs. Brown's tea-table were respectively named Parker and Clark : the former being Lady Westerham's somewhat sour-faced tirewoman of uncertain age, and the latter a girlish and sentimental creature in her early thirties, whose vocation it was to attend upon Lady Esther. Mrs. Brown and Parker made it their combined duty to quench the smouldering ashes of youth which still lingered in the sweet nature of the gentle Clark, and Perkins took equal pains to fan those dying embers whenever he found an opportunity of so doing unbeknown to the Allied Powers.

"Well, for my part, I like the new lord," remarked the hostess, as she put a pinch of bi-carbonate of soda into the teapot in order to correct the hardness of the Kent water ; "and in spite of him having written books and newspapers and goodness knows what, I consider him quite the gentleman."

"Not to be compared to the Captain," sighed Perkins, who, like his late lordship, had never quite forgiven Wilfred for Algy Wyvern's death.

"I think his present lordship is very handsome," simpered Clark, "such fine, expressive eyes."

"Not at all handsome, decidedly plain," retorted Parker, whose thin lips always seemed to open and shut by means of a spring ; "and too broad in the shoulders. I can only say I am surprised at your taste, Miss Clark, if that is what you admire."

"Come, come," said Perkins, endeavouring to throw

oil on the troubled waters, as was his wont; "surely personal beauty is, to a great extent, what we might call a question of taste. What one thinks handsome another thinks plain, and *vice versa*, and there's no blame attached to either side—none whatsoever." Then, seeing the cloud still hovering on Parker's wrinkled brow, he hastily added, "For my part, I always admired Master Algy's looks, he was so gay and soldier-like, and had such a way with him. But though his present lordship isn't altogether what you might call my style, I cannot deny that there is something rather *chick* and *distant* about him." Perkins had a charming habit, which never failed to impress his fellow-servants, of interlarding his conversations with phrases from the French, but he always pronounced them—as philologists tell us that the Norman nobles did during the Middle Ages—according to the English form of pronunciation.

"Too broad in the shoulders," repeated Parker, in whose ethical code thinness came next to godliness.

"Surely not for a gentleman," argued Clark. "I do like to see gentlemen broad in the shoulders, I think it looks so noble and manly." And the artless damsel gave an admiring glance at the butler's portly form, which sent a thrill through the spot at which it was aimed. True, it was not in the shoulders that Perkins' chief breadth lay; but that was a mere matter of detail. He took the speech in the spirit in which it was uttered, and smiled benignly upon the speaker.

"Is your tea to your taste, Mr. Perkins?" the hostess inquired politely. "I trust it isn't too strong."

"Not at all, Mrs. Brown, thank you. *Chicken a song gout*, as the French have it, and I must confess that I fancy a bit of body in my liquor."

"And is yours to your taste, Miss Parker?"

"Quite so, thank you, Mrs. Brown."

"And yours too, Miss Clark?"

"Well, Mrs. Brown, if I might have just a teeny weeny bit more sugar; perhaps Mr. Perkins wouldn't mind the trouble of passing it."

"Sweets to the sweet," cried the gallant butler, gracefully handing the sugar-basin to Clark, who helped herself with a becoming blush.

But this was too much for the Allied Powers.

"You take too much sugar, Miss Clark, to my thinking; it will make you stout," snapped Parker, who considered that the whole duty of women lay in the successful preserving of youthful slimness far into middle age.

Perkins was not generally brave enough to take Miss Clark's part when either of her elder rivals was present; but in the present instance the admiring glance which the young lady had cast at his waistcoat some minutes previously had roused all the latent manliness which that waistcoat covered. "I do not think that Miss Clark need have any anxiety on that score for many years to come," he genially remarked; "and even if she had, I must confess that a certain amount of *embongpoint* is not unbecoming in a lady. I admire a fine figure of a woman myself." Brave as this was, Perkins' valour was not unallied to discretion; for whilst a carping critic might have considered Parker too thin, the most catholic taste could not have denied that Mrs. Brown erred on the other side, so that there were still two to one in favour of Mr. Perkins—a good working majority.

"I'm always sorry when titles and estates have to go out of the direct line," said Mrs. Brown; "it often upsets establishments something terrible, and is

dreadfully inconvenient to the older servants. But since it was to happen, I don't know but what his present lordship isn't a good deal better than he might have been, all things considering." This was handsome praise from one who was soaked and saturated with the customs and traditions of the late rulers of Wyvern's End.

"It was a great pity that his late lordship never had a son," sighed Perkins, who had adored his master.

"That's all over and done with," replied Mrs. Brown, with some asperity and more truth, "and I don't see what call you have to pass a remark upon the subject, Mr. Perkins, even if it wasn't. Surely Providence knows what is best, even for the great families, and wants no advice either from you or me." She adored her mistress as much as Perkins had adored his master, and the mere shadow of any criticism on what Lady Westerham had either done or left undone always brought Mrs. Brown on to the warpath at once.

Perkins at once succumbed to her righteous anger, and handsomely expressed his confidence in the ability of Providence to carry on the house of Wyvern unassisted by any interference from the pantry. Then he added, "For my part, I always wish that the Colonel had married again and had another family; he was a widower for a great number of years. And that would have kept up what you might call the *ancient re-gime*." Perkins laid the accent of this last word on the first syllable, and made the second to rhyme with *time*.

"That is as may be," said the housekeeper darkly.

Fearing that he had again blundered, Perkins hastened to retrace his steps. "But I forgot that you do not approve of second marriages, Mrs. Brown," he

remarked, as if that consideration satisfactorily explained why the late Colonel Wyvern had never made a second entry into the holy estate.

"I didn't approve of Brown's second marriage, if that is what you mean," retorted Mr. Brown's widow; "but I've no objection to any man marrying again as long as he doesn't marry me."

"Some second marriages turn out very well," the romantic Clark ventured to remark.

"And some don't," snapped out Parker with asperity.

Clark could not refute this statement, so she continued amiably: "I wish that Lady Esther could find a nice husband, some splendid, manly gentleman, with a title for choice, for I'm sure a sweeter lady never drew breath."

"You're right there, Miss Clark," said Perkins; "I've known her ladyship as child and woman for five-and-thirty years, and never once have I heard a sharp word from her—not even when we've had footmen whose waiting-at-table was enough to upset an angel from heaven. I daresay you recall Charles, Mrs. Brown, the second footman who used to be always bowling for Master Algy instead of washing-up, and whose mind was more set upon cricket than upon the sauces and gravies that it was his duty to hand round?"

Mrs. Brown nodded a sorrowful acquiescence; the shortcomings of the aforesaid Charles had been as thorns in the side of herself and Perkins.

"Times without number," continued the butler, "have I seen that young nincompoop stand idly thinking about runs and catches, with the sauces and gravies cooling on the sideboard and fairly crying out to be handed round and me and the first footman

trying in vain to catch his eye. His lordship and her ladyship used to look round a little impatient, as you might say, and no wonder; but Lady Esther would say, 'Bread sauce, please,' as sweet and gentle as if it had come round at the right moment, and hadn't had time to stiffen into a cold poultice. Do what you could, nothing seemed to put Lady Esther out, and she is the same to this day."

"So she is," agreed Clark warmly; "never all the years I've been with her have I ever had a cross word from her ladyship. And I'm sure to hear her giving orders is more like hearing her ask for favours. It is 'Please, Clark, will you do this?' and 'Please, Clark, would you mind altering that?' for all the world as if she was one of ourselves instead of an earl's daughter born."

"Her ladyship brought up both her daughters beautifully," said Mrs. Brown. "I always said that though there might be handsomer young ladies in the county, there were none with such elegant manners as ours."

"Nor with better figures," added Parker. "Her Grace has grown too stout now for my thinking, but she still pays for dressing, and knows how to carry off her gowns. But Lady Esther's back view even now isn't a day over five-and-twenty; I'm sure I often envy Miss Clark the dressing of her, so long-waisted, and such a refined and aristocratic back."

"I cannot agree with you, Miss Parker, that her Grace is too stout," demurred the faithful Perkins, to whom "The Family" was a religion, and any word spoken against it rank blasphemy; "as I said before, I admire a fine figure in a lady, and in a lady of her Grace's exalted position one looks for a certain amount of what I may call presence. Duchesses are not made

to slip through crevices, like chimney-sweeps, Miss Parker : *grand dames* they are, and *grand dames* they ought to look."

"And her Grace does look it—every inch of her," agreed Mrs. Brown, who evidently measured her inches in two dimensions, including breadth as well as height; "and do you remember what a merry little girl she was, Mr. Perkins, and what a high-spirited young lady, and how the young gentlemen used to come after her, like flies round a honey-pot? And how proud his lordship used to be of her? And how he hid his pride for fear it should be sinful, and something dreadful happen to her to punish him for it?" Mrs. Brown had received the pure milk of the Word as prepared by the late Lord Westerham, and had never dreamed of refusing to assimilate any portion of it. His lordship had always looked well to the religious training of his household, and had led them in those thorny paths that he trod himself.

"And did her Grace have many admirers before she was married?" asked the sentimental Clark, always agog to hear of matters connected with the romantic side of life.

"My word, she did!" exclaimed Perkins; "rich and poor and some of all sorts. And she smiled on 'em all when the others weren't looking, and laughed at 'em all behind their backs. Oh! but she was a caution was the Duchess when she was young; I never knew her equal in *affairs do cure*."

"Well, I wish Lady Esther would pick up a young man!" remarked Clark, with a sigh.

Mrs. Brown was not slow to reprove her. "Excuse me, Miss Clark, but I do not think that is a proper way to speak of the quality. Lady Esther may be so sweet and nice-spoken that she never seems to remember

the difference between her position and ours; but it is not for us to forget it."

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Brown," replied the culprit with becoming meekness, "I spoke without thinking. I'm sure nothing could be farther from my thoughts than to speak disrespectfully of my dear lady."

"Granted, Miss Clark; pray don't say another word about it," was the housekeeper's gracious response. "I felt sure that no disrespect was intended; but in these terrible days of Socialism and goodness knows what—and all this stuff of pretending that we are as good as our betters, which I call nothing short of blasphemy, and a direct flying in the face of the Bible and the Church Catechisms—I think it behoves us all to show our reverence and respect for the Upper Classes, and to say nothing that could be mistook for anarchy or dynamite. I am sure Mr. Perkins will agree with me."

"I do, Mrs. Brown: *oh peed de la letter*. And permit me to add that I think your sentiments do you credit."

But the housekeeper was superior to such blandishments. "Not at all, Mr. Perkins; there is no credit in doing one's duty in the state of life to which we have been called: it is simply what is expected of us: unprofitable servants are we all."

"There's the drawing-room bell," exclaimed Perkins, rising from the table. "I must go and help these young fellows to take the tea-things away." Whereat he hastened to collect his satellites from their tea in the servants' hall, saying "*Oriver*" to the ladies as he departed.

CHAPTER IV

KINDRED SPIRITS

As Lord Westerham and his cousin passed through the gardens of the Dower House into Wyvern Park, and then ascended the sloping ground which led to one of the finest views in Kent, there was silence for a time between them—the restful silence which can only exist between persons who perfectly understand and are thoroughly at home with each other. It was perhaps strange that a young man, full of joy and hope and the pride of life, should so completely understand and enter into the feelings of a middle-aged and disappointed woman; but then Wilfred had a touch of literary genius, and had spent most of his life in that literary wonderland where a man can look at happiness through another man's eyes, and can intermeddle with the bitterness of a woman's heart—that magic country the inhabitants whereof live in glass houses, and learn, by means of the clue of imagination, to walk in the narrow way of truth.

And then between the two there was the tie of kinship—that mysterious bond which nothing can break, and which is sometimes so extremely helpful in unravelling the secrets of another's soul.

Suddenly Westerham broke the silence: "I am so glad to have met the Duchess. What an amusing woman she is!"

Esther smiled. "Yes, Eleanor is very clever in her way; so clever, in fact, that I often wonder she isn't

a bit cleverer. In places one sometimes comes suddenly to the end of her cleverness—so suddenly that one is in danger of falling over the edge.” That is another of the delights of kinship: relations can talk to one another about one another without a shadow of disloyalty.

“I know: like the coast of Norfolk.”

“To a certain extent she is so wonderfully shrewd and sharp,” Esther continued, “and, as the country people say, so quick at the uptake; and then suddenly you say something that she doesn’t understand in the least.”

Westerham looked tenderly at his companion. “I can quite understand that she doesn’t understand you. It would immensely surprise me if she did.”

“Well, she does in some things and not in others.”

“Precisely; she does in the little things and not in the big ones.”

Esther smiled again. “How clever of you to see all that! But it is quite true.”

“I can see more. I can see that she is such a past mistress in dealing with little things that she sometimes makes the big things seem little.”

“Yes, yes, she did so this very afternoon. She was so funny about her early love-affairs that she made me feel that all early love-affairs are more or less funny.”

“But they are not! Believe me, Esther, they are among the most serious things in the world.”

“I know they are. But you could never feel it when you were talking to Eleanor. When you are talking to Eleanor, you feel that love-affairs are funny; just as when you are talking to Mamma, you feel that they are wrong. And yet all the time, in your inmost heart, you know that they are neither wrong nor

funny, but are among the most solemn and beautiful things in the whole world; but you never have the courage to say so. At least I never have."

Wilfred's heart contracted with a spasm of pity for the sweet, crushed spirit that betrayed itself so unconsciously; but all he said was: "Why does she call the Duke *Tammy*? It doesn't strike me as a ducal name."

"When we first knew him his name was Tamford; his father was still alive, so we called him Tammy for short. And we have never got out of the habit of calling him Tammy."

"I see. And what do you call his eldest son?"

"We call him Jocko."

By this time they had reached the top of the hill, and the glorious Weald of Kent was spread out before their feet.

"By Jove! isn't it a sight?" Westerham exclaimed. "I feel like Moses looking upon the Promised Land! I don't wonder this view makes you think about the Millennium."

Esther gave a sign of rapture. "Isn't it glorious? I believe I love it more every time I see it! And yet," she added, the light dying out of her face, "I sometimes feel that it is wrong of me to enjoy mere natural beauty so much."

"Wrong, my dear girl? How could it be wrong?"

"Because it is always wrong to put the creature before the Creator; or to lavish upon natural beauty the adoration that we ought only to bestow upon spiritual perfection."

"Oh, Esther, Esther! How often must I try to convince you that your hard, Puritanical views are altogether false? Can't you understand that all natural beauty is an expression of Divine Beauty, and

that we ought to love and revere the creature for the sake of the Creator. Why put the two in opposition to one another?"

"Because to me they seem in opposition. This wonderful world of Nature is, after all, of the earth earthy, and so is at warfare with the spiritual and heavenly. Therefore I feel it is wicked of me to love it as passionately as I do."

Wilfred fairly groaned in spirit as he saw what havoc the stern creed of her forefathers had wrought upon this tender, beauty-loving soul. "Esther, I verily believe you think it is intrinsically better to perform a disagreeable duty than an agreeable one, and to gaze at an unpleasing sight rather than at a pleasing one!"

Esther looked surprised. "Of course I do. How could I think otherwise? A duty that is agreeable almost ceases to be a duty and becomes a pleasure."

"I admit that duty has to be done whether it is agreeable or whether it isn't; but I cannot see that its disagreeableness adds to its merit."

"But of course it does, Wilfred; I should have thought anybody could see that."

"Now supposing," persisted Westerham, "that you were in doubt as to which of two courses of conduct were the right one, and one course was pleasant to you and the other was unpleasant: do you mean to tell me that you would argue that the unpleasant course was the one you ought to follow?"

"Certainly I should. Otherwise where do self-denial and self-sacrifice come in?"

"I don't believe they come in at all on their own merits; they only come in with regard to other people."

Esther looked grieved. She hated anything approaching a disagreement between her cousin and

herself, and would gladly have given way to him in anything except in what she considered a matter of principle. On such points she was as adamant. "Oh, Wilfred! self-denial and self-sacrifice are of intrinsic virtue in themselves, quite apart from anything or anybody else."

"I can't see it," Wilfred retorted hotly. "I can see that it is good to go without a thing in order that somebody else may have it; but I can see no good in going without anything just for the sake of going without it."

"Oh, I can! I can see that it is good for me not to have a thing I particularly want, even if no one else has it."

"My dear Esther, what a horrible idea! I will admit that if by wearing a hair shirt I could enable some one else to put on a linen one, all well and good: by putting on the hair shirt I am performing an unselfish and righteous act. But if I put on the hair shirt and leave the linen one in the wardrobe, I am guilty of an act of folly which is of no advantage to either God or man."

But Esther shook her head. "No, Wilfred, you are wrong: the wearing of a hair shirt—metaphorically speaking—is a good thing in itself, quite apart from its indirect effects."

"It seems to me that motley is the only wear for you, sweet coz—not hair shirting—if you have such foolish ideas as these."

"Don't you see, Wilfred, we were sent into this world to do our duty, not just to be happy?"

"Certainly we were; but I maintain that the two ought to be synonymous, and that the real importance of doing our duty consists in the fact that in the doing of it our only true and lasting happiness lies."

Esther sighed. "I am afraid yours is rather a selfish doctrine, Wilfred."

Lord Westerham blushed with the shyness that always seizes a young Englishman when he tries to speak about the things that lie nearest to his heart. "Indeed it isn't; and I must have expressed myself badly to make you think so. Hang it all, Esther! it is jolly hard to put things into words, but what I mean is this: we are sent into the world to do the Will of God—and to *like* doing it: I don't believe He wants us to do His Way *against* our own; if He did, He could soon make us do it, whether we would or not. What He wishes is for us to want the same things as He wants, and so to be one with Him. He doesn't want us to do the right while all the time we are hankering after the wrong, but to do the right because the right is the only thing we care for."

Poor Esther's face was troubled as Wilfred preached these new and (to her) attractive doctrines. She felt sure they must be dangerous, simply because they were attractive, her passion for the unpalatable being insatiable. Since they appealed to her natural inclinations and instincts, she argued they must be wrong, and therefore ought to be withstood and trampled under foot.

"It seems to me," Wilfred went on, his face still red with the effort of trying to express his inmost thoughts, "that God doesn't care about our *ways* apart from our *wills*: He wants our wills to be in harmony with His, and then our ways can take care of themselves; for if our wills are right, our ways will soon follow suit. But your idea seems to be that there is some virtue in our wills going in one direction and our ways in another, and that the further apart these two directions are the more pleased God will be with us."

Esther longed to accept her cousin's teaching, and therefore struggled all the more fiercely against it. "Yes, I do believe something like that," she persisted. "I think that our natural inclinations ought to be thwarted and trampled upon."

"No, no; they ought to be taught and trained, which is quite a different thing. Of course I agree with you that the fact of our not loving the thing that is right in no way absolves us from the necessity of doing it; but I also maintain that our doing the thing that is right in no way absolves us from the necessity of loving it."

"For my part, I do not see that our own personal inclination comes into the matter at all," Esther remarked rather haughtily.

But to Wilfred this was rank heresy. "Good gracious, Esther, what an awful thing to say! What you call 'our own personal inclination' is the crux of the whole business, and matters more than anything! The sole object of our life here is to make 'our own inclination' in perfect harmony with the Will of God; when that is done, our spiritual education will be complete."

Esther's heart was heavy within her, as she felt that there was a traitor in her own inmost mind only too ready to admit the persuasive and (as she imagined) pernicious foe. It must be glorious to believe, as Wilfred did, that the delights of Art and the beauties of Nature were no dangerous sirens luring souls to destruction, but rather the angels of the Lord leading man upwards from earth to heaven: how she longed to embrace his faith, and so to end the long and weary conflict between the æstheticism of her mind and the asceticism of her spirit—that warfare which had been going on within her ever since she was a little child!

Suddenly there came into her mind the recollection of a Sunday, more than thirty years ago, when the door of Wyvern Church had been left open during the sermon and she had looked at the lovely view, framed by the old stone porch, instead of at the preacher presiding in the pulpit; and she remembered how severely she had been reprimanded afterwards, and how terrible her remorse had been. In her fear lest her childish sin should be repeated, she hastily put away from her all leaning towards the charms of Art and of Nature, and fortified her faltering spirit by inwardly denouncing them as the lust of the eye and the pride of life.

"I have always been interested," Westerham continued, "in the difference between Hebraism and Hellenism—a difference which, in other forms and under other names, has been present in every phase of the world's history, and which is, in short, the difference between you and me at the present moment. I stand for the Greek, with his love of joy and beauty, and you for the Jew, with his passion for duty."

Esther corrected him. "With his passion for righteousness, I think you mean: that was the ruling passion of the Jew."

"Yes, perhaps you are right. I accept your amendment."

"Well then, Wilfred, can't you see that if you accept my amendment you admit that the Hebraistic ideal is the right one? Righteousness is—must be—a higher thing than joy and beauty."

"Certainly I admit that under what we call the Old Dispensation the Jew's ideal was higher than the Greek's. But I go further than that. I maintain that under the New Dispensation the two ideals are combined. The Jew sought righteousness rather than happiness—the Greek strove for happiness rather than

righteousness; now there is neither Jew nor Greek, but we are all one in Christ. It is no longer a question of our either being good or being happy, but of being good because we are happy, and happy because we are good. I think the fine old verse pretty well expresses my creed in this matter—

‘ “Live while you live,” the epicure will say,
“And give to pleasure every fleeting day” :
“Live while you live,” the zealous preacher cries,
“And give to God each moment as it flies.”
Lord, in my life the two combined shall be ;
I live to pleasure while I live to Thee.’ ”

Early training dies hard, especially in these immature minds who have never ventured far afield from the parental track. And so it was with Lady Esther. “Your views are very beautiful,” she said with a wistful note in her voice, “and I should love to be able to think as you do, but I can’t. The whole of religion seems to me to be bound up with self-denial and self-sacrifice, and I do not think we were sent into this world to be happy or to enjoy ourselves.”

“Well then, I do: but to be happy and to enjoy ourselves in our perfect fulfilment of the Divine Law. We *are* sent into the world to be happy, dear Esther, but to be happy with the highest kind of happiness.”

And then the conversation drifted away from controversial matters into those many regions where the two cousins saw eye to eye. Although they did not always agree with one another, they invariably understood one another; and perfect comprehension—far more than complete acquiescence—is the truest basis for friendship.

It may have been because of his artistic faculty of putting himself in another person’s place, or it may have been because of the bond of kinship between

them, but anyhow, Wilfred, though he did not agree with Esther, completely understood her point of view. He did not think as she did : but he knew exactly why *she* thought so.

As they were strolling homewards, Esther said : "You are a most wonderfully understanding person, Wilfred. I wonder what makes you so clever at getting inside other people's minds."

"I don't know. Probably it is a question of temperament rather than of cleverness : a sign that I possess the dramatic instinct, and so am an adept at playing different parts."

A nice little smile played round Esther's mouth. "Probably it is, but you yourself don't think so."

"How did you find that out? I must return the compliment as to the wonderful understanding now."

"Tell me what you really think," Esther persisted.

"Well, if you will have it, my own theory—for which I have not the slightest thread of authority, mind you—is that we have all lived on this earth before, and so we understand the people who are the sort of people that we ourselves used once to be."

Esther gave a little gasp. Such flagrant unorthodoxy undoubtedly shocked her, but she felt, nevertheless, a certain amount of sinful pleasure in the shock. Wilfred was perfectly conscious both of the shock and of the pleasure derived from it, so he continued the process. "To my mind the idea of former incarnations is a tenable—though an absolutely unproved—theory, and does away with so much of the apparent injustice of this life."

"How?" asked Esther, her innocent face alive with guilty interest.

"Well, it seems awfully unfair—if this is absolutely our first appearance—that you should be born Lady

Esther Wyvern, and I the heir to a peerage, while thousands of equally deserving infants inherit the slums and the starvation of the dark places of the earth; but if our positions were reversed in former lives, and they were then wicked and bloated aristocrats, and we humble and devout slaves, the thing isn't so unjust after all, don't you see? We have all deserved as good as we have got."

Again there was a trace of her mother's haughtiness in Lady Esther's manner. "I think that it is the duty of everybody to submit to the lot ordained for them."

"But it's a jolly sight easier to submit to a thing when you can see the sense of it than when you can't," was her cousin's pertinent reply.

"And I don't think that men and women have the right to reason about the path which God has chosen for them to tread," she continued as if he had not spoken.

"It mayn't be their right, but it is most certainly their habit," retorted Wilfred, with a laugh. Esther's occasional little haughtinesses—so foreign to her usual almost deprecating gentleness—always amused and attracted him. He had been accustomed to the society of far handsomer and cleverer women than she, but the perfect high-breeding of these new-found relations of his—with its delicate flavour of unassuming pride and unconscious stupidity—had a wonderful fascination for him. He had lived so long in an atmosphere of brilliant egotism and self-conscious charm, that this experience of a pride too great to try to be clever and too sublimely self-assured to trouble to be attractive, was to him a most restful and delightful change. In the aristocracy of intellect there must, in the very nature of things, always be a certain amount of rivalry, because the places have yet to be gained and the prizes

to be won ; but in the aristocracy of birth there can be no such spirit of competition, since the prizes were awarded before the birth of the prize-winners, and their places already assigned to them in the Table of Precedence. Strawberry-leaves come by nature, and laurels by grace ; and it is still an open question which form the more creditable coronet.

"But never mind inequalities of position," continued Westerham, "think of inconsistencies of character ; they are also explained by my reincarnation theory. Look at yourself, for instance ; you are partly a pantheistic nymph and partly a devout nun—by no means suitable spirits to be packed into the same envelope. But explain it by the idea that you have been both a nymph and a nun, and some of the attributes of each still survive in your character."

"Oh, Wilfred, how interesting and how true ! And they not only survive, they fight with each other."

"Precisely ; I've often watched them at it. I expect that when you were a nymph you were a bit too pagan and beauty-loving, and so had to live again as a nun in order to balance yourself ; and when you were a nun you overdid it in the opposite direction, so now you are having a third chance to try to get the right hang of the thing at last ; but as the nun was the later incarnation, her influence is the stronger."

For the moment, Esther was so carried away by the fascination of Wilfred's theory—to her, in her limited mental atmosphere, an entirely new one—that she did not realize how far afield she was wandering in By-path Meadow. "That would explain," she said, "why one so often feels as if one were two different people. I frequently do, and it makes life so difficult. I shall never forget the nymph and the nun, Wilfred ; they seem to solve so many problems that have often

puzzled me. And do you think everybody has lived before?"

"Personally I do; but, as I have already told you, I have not the slightest warrant for my belief, except its reasonableness."

"But everybody doesn't have that dual nature which makes me find life so hard sometimes; at least they don't seem to," said Esther.

"My explanation of that is that the people who are consistent rather than complex—the people, in short, who find life comparatively easy—have always been more or less the same sort of people in their previous incarnations. Now if, in your pagan days, you had been a vestal virgin instead of a nymph, things would have been pretty easy for you, because the vestal and the nun would have got on all right together, and would soon have fallen into line, so that by now—in your third incarnation—you would be pretty well, so to speak, of a piece."

Esther laughed softly: Wilfred's whimsical ideas exactly suited what he would have called the nymph-side of her. "And there was really nothing in common between the nymph and the nun."

"Oh! yes, there was—one very important thing: both the nymph and the nun belonged to the aristocracy of their respective times: the nymph was descended from gods and goddesses, and the nun from paladins and Plantagenets, and they had neither of them anything in common with the plebeian populace. Now, as for your sister——" And here Westerham's grey eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Yes, what about Eleanor? I am sure she is never worried with dual natures and complexities of character. Eleanor must always have been the same sort of person."

Westerham nodded. "She must, but not always of the same rank. I say it with all reverence"—and here his eyes twinkled again—"as parsons always remark before their most irreverent utterances, but I feel sure that in some bygone and remote existence the Duchess belonged to the People with a capital P. Otherwise she would never have all that common sense and adaptability. Aristocracies do not adapt, they command."

Esther drew herself up. "Eleanor can command when she likes. I assure you she can be *très grande dame* when she chooses."

"But she knows when to exercise her rights and when to waive them, and no true aristocracy ever knows that. If they did, the world would still be innocent of such bugbears as republics and revolutions."

"However, I feel sure she was always a cheerful, sensible person, in whatever age she lived, don't you?"

"Certainly," replied Westerham; "but I cannot imagine her flitting through primæval forests, or floating on the clouds in Olympus, or even eating her heart out in a mediæval convent. I can rather picture her as one of the white-footed, laughing girls whose sires had marched to Rome; or, later, as a merry wife of Windsor."

Here Esther again demurred. "I think she might very well have been a great abbess, one of those who ruled over vast territories, don't you know?"

"If so, it was one of those lay sort of abbesses who got married and visited about among their friends. She never, never could have been a demure and devout nun, as you were."

"Then you think," continued Esther, after a slight pause, while the fresh breeze coloured her cheek and ruffled her hair until she looked almost young again,

"that the reason why the first time we meet some people and yet feel that we have known them all our lives, is that we really did know them in a previous existence?"

"Of course I do. I always love those lines of Kipling's—

Or ever the stately years had gone,
To the world beyond the grave,
I was a king in Babylon
And you were a Christian slave.'

I feel sure that you and I have met before, Esther, because we understood each other so well from the very beginning. I wonder if I played shepherd to your nymph, or father-confessor to your nun; or if you filled in an interval by taking the part of a gently born Puritan maiden while I was rollicking as a jolly Cavalier."

Esther was silent for a minute, drinking in the beauty of the scene as they passed from the park into the woods, where the ground was covered with daffodils dancing in the merry March wind. Then she said: "I like your theory, Wilfred, it makes life so much more interesting and so much less hard. I mean if one feels one's life slipping away, and there has been nothing in it but dull routine, one is inclined to murmur, though, of course, I know that murmuring is wrong; we ought to accept our fate, whatever it is. But if we feel that there are other lives before and behind us—lives on this earth, under the same conditions as this one, and filled with all the common, earthly blessings that this present one has lacked—it puts quite a different face on things. One doesn't mind being a dull old maid in the intervals between dancing as a dryad and serving as a Christian slave," she added, with a wistful smile; "sitting out a dance

now and then, you know, is quite different from going partnerless through the whole evening."

Wilfred looked down on her very tenderly, and something stirred in his heart which was neither friendship nor cousinly affection. Perhaps the spring in the air was responsible for it, with its magic message of a new heaven and a new earth—or perhaps the fairy-like beauty of the wood through which they were passing, which looked like some fair temple with its pavements of gold and its rafters of fir—or perhaps there was something in his theory after all that they two had known and loved each other in some previous existence; but, whatever the reason, the fact remained that, as Lord Westerham looked at the tall and graceful figure at his side, and realized how tragic is the fate of any woman who feels age coming upon her before she has tasted the full flavour of youth, he experienced an almost passionate pity, and something else which, though not exactly pity, is supposed to be near akin to it.

CHAPTER V

AN AWAKENING

THAT spring was a wonderful time for Lady Esther Wyvern. For forty years she had wandered in the wilderness of childhood's dreams and girlhood's mirages; but now at last she had climbed the mountain peak, and had seen the promised land of womanhood spread out before her eyes. And she fairly trembled at the glory of the vision.

As yet she could not believe that to her had been given the command, "Enter ye in and possess it." That seemed too impossibly good to be true. At present she felt more like him who saw that good land afar off and yet was not permitted to pass over into its borders, than like him who was appointed to lead the people into the country for which they had yearned so long. She had become so accustomed to standing on one side and seeing others pass by and leave her behind, that she could not realize that at last her turn had come to take her normal share of human love and human happiness.

At first she did not know what had happened to her. She was not at all the type of woman that is given to self-analysis: she had always been far too proud to be egotistical. All she was conscious of was that a strange sense of completeness and fulfilment had somehow flooded her being: the same feeling that is produced by the solution of a puzzle or the correct answer to a sum. That elusive Something, which had

haunted her all her life, seemed suddenly to have materialized itself, and to have become a moving factor instead of a tantalizing mystery. She had ceased to experience that indefinable ache of the soul which hitherto beauty of any kind—whether of Art or Thought or Nature—had awakened in her. The view from Grotham Hill no longer spoke to her of an apocalyptical Millennium, but of an actual and present happiness: it now seemed rather a specimen of earth than a suggestion of heaven. In short, the note of interrogation had been suddenly wiped off the slate of life, and she had not yet read what had been written in its place.

She possessed so little curiosity either about herself or about other people that she did not strive to find a reason for this exquisite content. She merely basked in it as she basked in the sunshine, with regard to the hygienic properties of which she was absolutely ignorant. She had no idea that sunlight was a powerful disinfectant, as she would have had if she had been born in a lower grade or a later decade. She only knew that it was sunshine and that she loved it; and she regarded her happiness in very much the same simple and unscientific way.

Then gradually the mists of her blissfulness wreathed themselves into shape, and the shape assumed the form of her cousin, Lord Westerham. It took weeks—almost months—for Esther to understand the meaning of the change that had come o'er the spirit of her dream: but slowly it dawned upon her that the miracle which had been wrought in her was that miracle common to all humanity, known as falling in love.

It is hard to understand the point of view of those people who find an insuperable difficulty in accepting

the belief in miracles : the only real wonder is that miracles do not happen oftener. It is not true to say that miracles do not happen : they happen every day and every hour, and the people who say that they do not believe in miracles merely mean that they only believe in the miracles to which they are accustomed—that they are so much the slaves of custom that their minds cannot accept the unusual. The quality in which they are lacking is not really faith, but imagination. After all, when one comes to analyse it, the sun standing still upon Ajalon was no more (and no less) of a miracle than the sun rising morning by morning out of the marshes of Essex and Kent, and going down at evening-time behind the towers of Westminster ; the changing of water into wine at the marriage-feast of Cana was no more (and no less) of a miracle than the gathering together of the waters that run among the hills, and the transforming of them into showers to water the earth. If we accept (as we are bound to do) the visible miracle which we call Nature, how can we hesitate to accept the invisible miracle which we call Grace : since the difference between the two is really in degree and not in kind ? The sun can neither stand still nor go on of himself : the water can neither turn into wine nor into dew by its own power. Given that we accept (as again we are bound to accept) the greatest miracle of all, the miracle of life, then where is the difficulty in accepting its logical sequence, the miracle of immortality ? It would be a far greater stretch of credulity to believe that life once existent could ever become extinct, than that it should continue for ever. Nothing is impossible ; but some things are usual and some are unusual ; and we have got into a stupid and misleading habit of calling the unusual things miracles. And this habit has led some of us

into the error of thinking that the usual things do themselves, while the unusual things are done by God, and therefore (so the most misguided maintain) are not done at all! Which is manifestly absurd. We walk, as a matter of course, almost every May of our lives through woods carpeted with wild hyacinths which make us almost faint with the exquisiteness of their beauty; yet the idea of a pavement of sapphire turns us cold with doubt. We wander each March across fields of Lent lilies which fill us with a gladness beyond words; yet we relegate streets of gold to the regions of symbolical apocalypse. But why should the Hand Which has fashioned the glory that we have seen, find it difficult to fashion the glory that we have not seen, and that is yet in store for us?

With God all things are possible: without Him nothing was made that is made; so that we ourselves are standing witnesses to His power, and also to the truth that miracles do happen, since we ourselves are the supremest miracles of all. And so we go on to the blessed assurance that all things are ours—whether principalities or powers or things present or things to come—because we are His.

Among the many, many miracles of this miracle-filled universe, there are few more wonderful than that known as falling in love. In this respect it is akin to the miracle that we call spring, since men and women never become really used to these two things however often they may happen; and these two things never lose their mystery and their magic and their bewitching glamour. No spring is quite like any other spring: every year there seems to be a new heaven and a new earth, when the land breaks forth into singing and the trees of the field clap their hands. And, in the same way, no love-story is quite like any other

love-story; and every time that a man and a woman really fall in love with each other the old things pass away and all things become new.

There is a custom, current among the baser sort of men and women, to treat as a joke the falling in love of a woman no longer young: and this is one of the points wherein life is so much harder upon women than upon men. Should a middle-aged man desire to enter the garden of Eden, the gates are flung open to receive him, while the youngest and fairest of Eves stands ready in the midst to bid him welcome. He may have been there often before—he may hope to re-enter the magic portals many times again: and he is right in assuming that they never are, and never will be, closed to him. The mere fact of his manhood gives him the right to a private key into the garden of Eden, as surely as the fact of his taking a house in Grosvenor Square will entitle him to a private key into the Square gardens.

But with a woman it is different. Should she—when once her youth is over—tap timidly at Eden's gate, she will always find the armed cherubim upon duty, and nine times out of ten there will be smiles upon their angelic faces which will cut deeper than their fiery swords. If she be endowed with exceptional beauty or grace or charm, she may eventually win through, and enter the magic portals; and then the mirth of her friends will be turned into hardly more complimentary amazement, and they will one and all exclaim, "How wonderful, at her age!"

It is in matters such as this that men have such an unfair advantage over women: not only in the extension of their franchise, but still more so in the extension of their youth. But an end is coming to this unfair advantage. What women really want—and

what they are gradually gaining if only they would understand it—is the world's realization of the fact that age cannot wither nor custom stale the true woman's infinite variety : that the years give more to her than they take away, and that the longer she lives the more competent she is to warn, to comfort and command. Slowly and surely the world is learning to understand this : every generation pushes the age-limit of a woman's reign further on. Juliet's balcony-scene occurred at fourteen : Jane Austen's unmarried heroines were on the shelf at twenty. But we are changing all this. The women of to-day are eligible for balconies in their thirties, and ineligible for shelves until their seventies—and even then the shelves are quite prominent and comfortable resting-places. Nevertheless, to a certain conventional class of mind, the paths of real romance are closed to all except youthful feet. The twentieth century is so far in advance of its predecessors that it cheerfully permits middle-aged women to flirt and to marry, and even applauds them for so doing : but it cannot as yet understand that ideal romance—the romance that is too pure for passion and too exquisite for comradeship—finds its home in the heart of the fading spinster rather than in that of the budding girl. For a true woman's love is of the soul—not of the body ; and souls cannot age, they can only mature and develop.

There was much that was extremely attractive to Lady Esther in Lord Westerham's character. In the first place, he was so utterly different from all the people with whom hitherto she had been brought into contact. He was full of new ideas and fresh interests, and he stimulated her mind as it had never been stimulated before. Yet underneath this difference there was the bond of class and of kinship. However daring

and refreshing and surprising he might be, the fact that he was a Wyvern was always present to her subconscious mind. Had he been equally clever and interesting and yet not well-born, it is doubtful whether Esther—being what she was—would ever have fallen in love with him. Eleanor might have done so, but not Esther.

And then he was obviously attracted by her; and that is a charm which never fails to rouse the interest of the normal woman. No woman ever dislikes a man who admires her quite as much as she would dislike him if he did not: and if she likes him to begin with, his admiration greatly intensifies this liking. Esther had received so little admiration in her life that when it did come it was doubly precious to her. Moreover Westerham was very comforting and cheering in his ways and conversation, and Esther was by nature prone to look on the gloomy side of things. For instance, he gladdened her heart one day—that tender heart which stood dismayed at the thought that she was growing old before she had ever been young—by remarking—

“It is ridiculous how people talk about growing old! There is no such thing as age really. Our bodies grow old, I admit, and so do our clothes, but we ourselves don’t. It is just as absurd to call a man old because his body is infirm, as it would be to call him old because his coat is shabby. Bodies are just as much mere garments as clothes are: and in the same way we shall wear them out and get new ones.”

“But people do get old and infirm,” Esther argued, always slow to receive any gospel of good tidings; “I mean their minds do, as well as their bodies.”

“No, no, no, they don’t—not really. Their minds for the time being may be affected by their bodies, but only temporarily and superficially. The people themselves—the actual real people, who are dressed for the time in clothes and bodies—grow old no more than do the angels who excel in strength : continued existence means to them, as to the angels, increase of knowledge and breadth of experience. There is no such thing as age in the spirit world. Can your imagination picture such a thing as an old angel ?”

Esther could not forbear a smile. “Hardly,” she said.

“Yet the same angels, who shouted for joy at the dawn of creation, sang the first Christmas carol to the shepherds at Bethlehem, and will likewise raise the chant of ‘Blessing and honour and glory and power’ after the final defeat of death and of time. But they have not grown old during the march of the centuries : they go on from strength to strength, as we shall do when we have put off these tiresome bodies that sometimes hamper us so much, and when we have put on the spiritual bodies that know neither death nor decay.”

These theories of Westerham’s were very soothing to Esther, brought up as she had been in the shadow of the mid-Victorian horror of age and death. True, she herself had not lived in mid-Victorian times ; but her parents had been saturated with the spirit of that age, and had trained up their children in it as far as they were able. Eleanor, as she expressed it, had marched with the times ; but Esther, like the obedient child that she was, had sat still where her parents had placed her.

It was therefore not altogether strange that Lady Esther should fall in love with Lord Westerham ; but

what really was remarkable was that Lord Westerham should fall in love with her. Nevertheless, it happened.

With him, as with Esther, the charm of novelty worked : she was as great a change to him as he was to her. Although he belonged to an old and noble family, he had spent the whole of his life—until he succeeded to the peerage—in a totally different world, a world where brains counted for more than blood, and wit for more than wealth : the delightful world of literature and art, which—for want of a better name—men call Bohemia. He was not prepared to say that this new world, into which he had suddenly been transplanted, was better than the old one, in which he had been brought up : it was altogether different, and he was sufficiently clear-sighted to perceive that difference does not necessarily spell superiority or inferiority, but that it always spells experience and education, and frequently fascination as well.

And this fascination overpowered him when he was brought into intimate companionship with his many-times-removed cousin, Lady Esther Wyvern.

He could see that she was by no means handsome, and that her charm, such as it was, was of what in his unregenerate days he would have called the "stodgy" order, and he had been accustomed to the society of both brilliant and beautiful women. But what he had not been accustomed to was the absolute assurance of the real patrician : an assurance which was untainted by any trace of self-assertion, because it needed none ; which was never put into words, because it was always there in fact ; which was absolutely innocent of any touch of egotism, because it belonged not to an individual but to an order ; and which was profoundly indifferent to adverse opinion or remark, because for

centuries it had been placed above criticism. Westerham was quick to recognize this assurance as a very fine thing in itself; fine as certain things in Nature—such as the stillness of mountains and the silence of forests—are fine, and also restful, as mountains and forests are restful. He felt like a Londoner, who, when he first comes into the country, listens to the silence after the roar of the city traffic: so Westerham listened to the silence, and found it very good.

Some persons are endowed with the gift of X-rays in their spiritual eyes: they can see below the surface to the underlying structure of character. It is doubtful whether the possession of this gift makes for happiness, though as a rule it makes for wisdom. Those who possess it do not make so many mistakes as other people: but, on the other hand, mistakes are often as great a source of pleasure as of pain. A Fool's Paradise is still a Paradise, though only a jerry-built affair; but even a jerry-built Paradise is a more agreeable place of residence than a solid and substantial Purgatory, designed by the Society of Architects and approved by the London County Council. However—be this particular gift a blessing or a bane—Lord Westerham happened to possess it, and its possession enabled him clearly to perceive what an exquisite jewel of a soul was hidden in the somewhat plain casket of his cousin Esther's outward appearance. And seeing the intrinsic beauty of an almost flawless character, the artist in him fell down before it and worshipped.

The present generation thinks that it has outgrown the mid-Victorian tenet formulated by the greatest of the Victorian poets that "We needs must love the highest when we see it." It is now the fashion—and a morbid fashion, too—to find beauty in what is

diseased and decadent, and most particularly in what is sinful. In the literature of to-day—be it fiction or journalism—we are bidden to look at whatsoever is impure and unlovely and of bad report, and to think on these things. We do it—our natural curiosity compels us to do it—and the national character suffers in consequence. But we do it for the sake of curiosity, and not for the sake of enjoyment; and therefore the national character will not suffer permanently, since curiosity is, after all, only a surface thing. Underneath the modern affectation of decking our swine with pearls and rejecting that which is holy as unfit for the dogs, there still exists, deep down in the heart of man, man's instinctive homage before Truth and Righteousness. "We needs must love the highest when we see it," as did our fathers before us; but just now there is a passing cloud before the sun, and we do not see as clearly as they did. But the cloud will pass as do all other clouds, and the days of open vision will come back to us again. Let us remember, however, that by looking at and thinking about that which is unlovely and of evil report, we are blinding our eyes still further; since it is only the pure in heart who shall see God. And they shall not only see Him but shall grow like Him, for they shall see Him as He is.

Thus it came to pass that Westerham and Esther stood on the threshold of the gate that leads into the garden of Eden, and it seemed for the time being as if the cherubic sentinels had sheathed their fiery swords, and left the magic portals unguarded, so that at a word the gates would fly open, and the lovers would enter in and possess that good land. But that word had not yet been spoken.

As the Dower House was situated at the edge of Wyvern Park, it was easy for the inhabitants of the

large house and the small one to meet every day, and Wilfred and Esther availed themselves to the full of this facility. By this time Lady Westerham had grown very fond of Wilfred, and frequently expressed to her elder daughter her approval of the goal towards which her younger was advancing. But she never mentioned the subject to Esther herself; she would have considered it indelicate to do so.

One Sunday afternoon in the early summer, the four were sitting—as now they so often sat—in the garden of the Dower House, the Duchess having motored over from Stoneham Abbey to see her mother.

“I really think it is too hot for you to motor in this weather, Eleanor,” remonstrated that parent with true maternal anxiety; “it is the greatest pleasure to me to see you, my dear, as you know; but I would on no account derive pleasure at the cost of your pain.”

“Oh no, Mamma, it isn’t at all hot motoring, it is the coolest thing you can do in this weather,” replied the Duchess. “I motored up to London yesterday, and didn’t find even that too hot.”

Here maternal anxiety roused itself over another count. “But, my dear, surely you don’t motor to London—through all that dreadful traffic! It seems to me a most terribly dangerous thing to do. For my part, I never liked the traffic in town, even before motors were invented: in those days I always trained my coachman to keep to back streets and quiet ways. But now the danger is tenfold.”

“I know it is, Mamma, and that’s just the point. I used to be frightened in the old days, and to put my trust in a steady coachman and back streets. But after I began to motor, I realized that it was no good putting my trust in anything but Providence; nothing less was adequate; and Providence, of course, is as

competent on the Old Kent Road as in an Alpine valley. Therefore I am now able to go up to town in the car without turning a hair."

Lady Westerham looked happier. "Well, Eleanor, I am thankful to know that you look for help where the only true help is to be found, though I cannot help wishing that you would express yourself a little more reverently. In my young days people talked of serious things in a serious manner."

But the Duchess was not so easily set down. "I know they did, and it was a great mistake. It made what you call 'serious things' seem forced and unnatural, and not fitted for everyday use. If a missionary goes to preach the Gospel to the South Sea Islanders because he believes that Providence will take care of him, nobody takes any notice; but if a Duchess motors along the Old Kent Road because she believes Providence will take care of her, people begin to think there's something in Providence after all. It is by treating serious things as if they were not serious that you make people believe in their seriousness."

"Still I cannot countenance anything that savours of irreverence," persisted Lady Westerham.

"It isn't irreverence, Mamma; it's the highest sort of reverence. You always talk about religion in your poorly voice—I mean the voice you use to people who are ill or in deep mourning—and that makes it seem as if it were only something useful for the sick or the sorrowful, like medicine or crape."

"No, Eleanor, I should indeed be grieved to give the impression that religion is not for all classes and all conditions; but I own I treat with due reverence sacred things, and am reticent about them."

The Duchess nodded: "Exactly; that was the fashion of your day; you dressed up your souls in

spiritual crinolines, so as to keep everybody at a distance from them. But we are different; and I think it is a mistake so to cover up what you call serious things that they finally get buried out of sight. I am sure Westerham agrees with me," she added, appealing to Wilfred.

"Of course I do," replied Wilfred; "it is by stripping things of their conventional trappings that you show they are truths instead of traditions."

"I fear that this isn't an age of tradition," said Esther; "I only wish it were."

"It is," retorted Westerham; "only nowadays we call it claptrap. But it's really the same thing—fiction masquerading as fact. All the modern nonsense about the opposing interests of the classes and the masses—and the aristocracy and the democracy—and the employer and the employed—is pure claptrap. There *are* no opposing interests: all those interests are one and the same if the people would only be sensible and believe it."

Esther caught her breath. These conversational bombshells of Wilfred's never failed to thrill her. "But surely, Wilfred, there is a horrible spirit abroad of hatred of class for class."

"I know there is, but it is a lying spirit. Each class is necessary to the happiness and well-being of the others. This modern idea of class-antagonism is merely a fresh staging of that fine old comedy according to S. Paul, where the foot said, 'Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body'; and the ear said, 'Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body'; and all the members of the body quarrelled until they found they were indispensable to each other, and that the eye could not get on without the hand any more than the head could get on without the feet."

"But, my dear Wilfred," remarked Lady Westerham, "S. Paul was speaking then of the Church and not of the world. Unfortunately these divisions do exist nowadays among persons in different ranks of life."

"So they do, and in the Church, too, for the matter of that, Lady Westerham. I am not saying that class antagonism does not exist, but that it need not exist: that it is a fictitious structure raised upon a false foundation—not a necessary evil evolved out of an effete civilization. To carry on S. Paul's metaphor, the hand might cut off the ear, or the foot kick out the eye in their passion for independence; but I fail to see that either hand or foot would benefit in the long run by the transaction."

"I am so glad to hear you speak against independence," exclaimed the Duchess; "it is a word that rouses my worst passions because it means nothing. Nobody really is independent."

"It is a thing which rouses my worst passions, Duchess, because it is undermining so much of what is good and strong and efficient in our national life. A class cannot stand alone any more than a man can stand alone. There is no such thing in the universe as standing alone. It simply isn't done."

"And even trying to do it," added the Duchess, "is as absurd as trying to build card houses by standing the separate cards upright in a row."

"It is quite as absurd and much more dangerous," continued Westerham, "because the spirit of independence is slowly and surely blinding men's eyes to the importance of corporate life and corporate duties. In these days of strong party politics the common weal is fading out of the picture. We have still crusted old Tories and violent young Radicals, but I doubt if

we have any good citizens left among us." I think we are as ready as we ever were to fulfil our duty to our own particular party or our own particular class; but I doubt if we are as anxious as our forefathers were to fulfil our duty to the State; at least we have broken the State up into its component parts and try to do our duty to those parts separately, which is manifestly absurd."

"I wish the lower classes were not so bitter against their superiors," remarked Lady Westerham; "it appears to lead to so much unpleasantness. And I am sure we have always done our best to be kind to them," she added, with a sigh.

Westerham could not forbear a smile, and the Duchess laughed outright. "Oh, Mamma, how priceless!"

"Well, my love, it is quite true. As you know, your dear father was always most generous to all the tenants and labourers on his estate, and so was his father before him. They felt it part of their Christian duty to show kindness to the poor."

Wilfred foolishly tried to explain the case. "But you see, Lady Westerham, the consciousness of being part of a corporate body means something infinitely more than just showing kindness to one another now and then. You cannot imagine S. Paul's suggesting that the eye should be kind to the ear, or the head to the feet. That would in no wise have met the case."

Lady Westerham drew herself up in her most stately manner. "But he never did just suggest such a thing, Wilfred: never even hinted at it. And I cannot say that I approve of young people putting words into the mouths of the Apostles which are not recorded in Holy Scripture. To my mind it savours of irrever-

ence. Besides, we have been warned against the dreadful sin of either adding to or taking from the contents of the Bible."

Esther looked unhappy: she was always terrified lest Wilfred's unconventional way of expressing himself should shock her mother's sensibilities. But the Duchess was in ecstasies of suppressed mirth. She was more subtle intellectually than she appeared to be, and the humour of two people talking to each other in what they supposed to be the vulgar tongue when they were really expressing themselves in two absolutely different languages, or going along parallel lines in the vain expectation of eventually meeting, never failed to appeal to her.

Wilfred succumbed immediately. "I am sorry, Lady Westerham; I didn't mean to be irreverent."

Her ladyship forgave him at once. "I am sure you did not intend any irreverence, Wilfred; but the tone of the present day is so utterly opposed to the spirit of reverence that, as I have said before, young people are apt to fall into this fault unwittingly. In fact I think it is the irreverence of the present day that leads to the bitterness between the classes that we have just been deploring. The lower orders have ceased to revere and respect their betters; and hence all this trouble and mischief."

But Wilfred was on his hobby-horse again, vainly endeavouring to teach Lady Westerham to keep pace with him. He, as well as the Duchess, kept a sense of humour: but she had kept one for nearly twenty years longer than he had; and humour is one of the things that vastly improve with keeping. "I rather should say," he argued, "that the mischief arose from both classes having forgotten that they are members one of another, and that in an ideal state they ought

to be too closely welded together for either kindness or enmity to be possible between them."

"Ah, no, Wilfred! kindness is never impossible in any circumstances. I cannot agree with such a hard-hearted doctrine as that," replied Lady Westerham, graciously continuing along her parallel line, and thereby affording her elder daughter fresh ecstasies of amusement.

But Wilfred was too much in earnest to be amused. "You don't see my point, Lady Westerham. It is not a hard-hearted doctrine at all. It is because the classes are fundamentally one that I say kindness is impossible between them. Just as in an ideal marriage kindness is impossible: a man cannot be kind to himself. At least he cannot help being so, and therefore what you call kindness ceases to be a virtue and becomes an instinct. I always hate to hear a man called a kind husband: it sounds as if he and his wife were two instead of one."

"There again, my dear Wilfred, you speak with the impetuosity and ignorance of youth. I am an old woman, and I have been married, and I know by experience that a kind husband is the greatest blessing that any woman can have." Lady Westerham—though gently reproving—was still gracious to the delinquent.

Esther then made an attempt to bring the two conversational combatants into line. "I don't think you quite see what Wilfred means, Mamma. He means that antagonism between the classes is really as unnatural as antagonism between the sexes: that they are really the complements of one another, and are incomplete by themselves."

Her mother was pleased to accept Esther's translation of her cousin. "Then, my love, I thoroughly

agree with him. Rivalry between the sexes is even worse than rivalry between the classes."

Wilfred could rein in his hobby-horse no longer, so he dashed once more into the conversation. "It always seems to me that the different classes are types of different ages: the aristocracy, being old and longer established, has all the attributes of age—temperance, wisdom, stability, experience, culture and a fine sense of proportion. The democracy, on the other hand, has the characteristics of youth—passion, simplicity, ignorance, inexperience, energy and vital force. While the middle class possesses the qualities of middle age—common sense, practical efficiency, intellectual power and the capacity for business."

"Well done, Westerham!" exclaimed the Duchess, "I think you have hit the matter off to a T. You seem as happy at metaphor as S. Paul."

"My dear," began her mother reprovingly. But the Duchess forestalled the maternal rebuke. "I beg your pardon, Mamma: I forgot for the moment you were there, otherwise I shouldn't have taken the liberty of dragging S. Paul again into the discussion. I think Westerham is right about us. We are old; we have the limitations as well as the graces of age, and that is why we need the lower and the middle classes to stir us up a bit. (Though I hope, by the way, that they won't stir us up as Archie used to stir his tea when he was a little boy—so violently that it was all over the nursery tablecloth!) And in the same way they need us to tone them down. It is absurd of the socialists to try to make us all the same. It would spoil the whole show if we were."

"The wisdom of age is quite a different thing from the intuition of youth," said Westerham; "not better

nor worse, but essentially different: and the State needs both."

Here the Countess fully agreed with him. "You are quite right, Westerham: age teaches us lessons which nothing else can teach us. As I often say to my children, 'I do not know better than you do because I am cleverer than you, for I am not; but because I am so much older.'"

"And a correct sense of proportion is certainly one of the graces of age," remarked Esther. "It is funny, as the years go on, to see the change in our scale of values, and in our ideas of what are the things that really matter."

"That is true, my child," said her mother; "as we grow older our ideas grow simpler, and therefore nearer to the truth."

The Duchess nodded sagely. "I know what you mean exactly. When I was young, my idea of the colour blue was my turquoise necklace, and how it brought out the colour of my eyes: then, after a time, blue came to mean Tammy's Garter-ribbon, and Windsor uniform, and things of that kind; but now, when the colour blue is mentioned, I think of delphiniums and anchusas and wild hyacinths. I've gone back to the land."

"Which things are an allegory," added Westerham with delight. "You have exactly caught my meaning."

The Duchess's blue eyes twinkled. "I do not always know better than Mamma because I am so much younger, but because I am so much cleverer," she murmured *sotto voce*, so that only Westerham could hear her.

"It is because of its acquired sense of proportion that an hereditary Upper House is so necessary to a

good Government of the State, he continued. "Of course I don't for a moment pretend that an aristocracy as an aggregate has more brains than a democracy : I don't think it has, any more than an old man has necessarily more brain-power than a young one. But it has the wisdom which only age can bring. It has possessed wealth and rank and power for so long that experience has taught it exactly how much they are worth and how little; and therefore it estimates their value far more accurately than a less richly endowed class can possibly do. It has practically nothing to gain and nothing to lose; and consequently its judgment is unbiassed by any personal considerations. I don't pretend that an aristocracy—if it had anything to gain—would be any more altruistic or selfless than a democracy. But it hasn't, and that makes all the difference : just as an old man, whose fortune is made and whose position is established, is far more competent to give unbiassed opinions than a young man who has still his way to make, and is more or less blinded by the struggles of youth and the lures of ambition."

The Duchess nodded. "And just as I have attained to a far truer estimate of the happiness to be derived from stars and garters, since I let them be superseded in my thoughts by delphiniums and anchusas."

"Talking of anchusas, Eleanor," said Lady Westersham, rising from her seat, "reminds me that I have a wonderful new variety to show you. It is called the Dropmore, and is a most beautiful shade of blue. I am sure you would like it for your herbaceous border at Stoneham, and I will give you some plants, if you like."

The Duchess hoisted herself out of the low garden chair where she was sitting, and obediently followed

her mother across the lawn in the direction of the flower-garden, leaving Westerham and Esther alone amid the lengthening shadows.

As soon as the two ladies were out of sight, Wilfred got up from the chair on which he had been sitting, and sat down on the one close beside Esther and the tea-table, which Lady Westerham had just vacated. For a moment he was silent, and Esther quivered all over with that wonderful thrill which is like nothing else on earth, and which we all experience at the magical moment when we feel the gate of Eden receding at our touch, and opening to our dazzled eye the glorious wonderland that lies just beyond.

The day of formal proposals is over. They went out with Paisley shawls and crinolines. Therefore all that Lord Westerham said, as he bent over his cousin's chair and took her hand, was, "I can't say it all, Essie, it's too big to be said. But you know it all without my saying it, don't you, my darling?"

And the question which was too big to be asked was also too big to be answered. Esther said never a word. But as she lifted up her face to his and their lips met, she knew what the Shulamite meant when she cried, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth : for his love is better than wine !"

CHAPTER VI

BLISS

AFTER a few ineffable minutes, while Esther, for the first time in all her forty years, tasted of the cup of human happiness, she drew herself—pale with emotion—out of her lover's embrace.

"You must go now, dearest," she implored in a trembling voice, "I cannot bear any more happiness at present. I feel as if I should die of the bliss of it all."

Westerham was seized with compunction as he saw how white her lips had grown under his kisses. He feared that she was going to faint. He, too, was excited, but he could take his happiness more calmly than she could: he had not waited and thirsted for it so long.

"Dearest, let me get you something," he cried, looking vainly at the decimated tea-table for a suitable restorative.

Esther gave him a wan smile. "No, don't trouble about me. I shall be all right in a minute. It was just the bliss of it that made me feel faint and dizzy for a moment. You see, no man has ever kissed me before."

A commoner-minded man might have smiled at this reception of her first kiss by a woman no longer young; but Westerham felt inclined to bow his head and take his shoes off his feet because he was standing on holy ground. To him there was something

infinitely beautiful—as well as infinitely pathetic—in the revelation of what love meant to this lady of high degree, who had waited so long and so patiently for its coming, and who welcomed it with the strength of a woman and the freshness of a girl. And his heart thrilled with a deep and abiding joy as he realized what a privilege was his in having won such a love for his own.

He was very tender with her—he understood her so completely—and she soon recovered herself under his cousinly care, and was able to look her happiness in the face without reeling with the intoxication of its ecstasy. Then—when he saw she was able to bear it—he put off the cousin and again put on the lover. “Essie, do you really love me?” he whispered, taking her once more in his arms.

She laid her head on his shoulder in a rapture of such perfect rest and peace and absolute satisfaction as she had never dreamed of in her life before. She had often felt lonely and neglected and desolate as she had seen love flitting like a butterfly among fairer flowers, but always passing her by because of her lack of beauty. And she had puzzled and wondered and rebelled—as far as so innately gentle a spirit was capable of rebellion—as she pondered on the question why the one gift of personal beauty should outweigh all the others put together in the scales of a woman’s happiness, and why this only gift that mattered should have been denied to her.

But now all her wonder and rebellion were over: Wilfred had come and had turned this darkness into the light of a happiness too great to be expressed or understood. It was good for her that she had been afflicted with so long a period of hope deferred: her former loneliness and disappointment only seemed to

make her present joy the more complete. No young girl, who accepts happiness as her right and as a matter of course, could appreciate the full delicacy of its flavour as did Esther, who had thirsted for it so long in vain. Love may offer his syllabubs to girls yet in the schoolroom, but it is only women who have lived and suffered that can taste his sacramental wine.

There is a Latin proverb to the effect that he gives twice who gives quickly : and this may be true of the gifts of men. But with the gifts of God it is otherwise. He keeps the best wine till last, and then gives it—not in wine cups—but in waterpots filled to the brim.

"Sweetheart, do you really love me?" repeated Wilfred, as Esther remained silent from excess of happiness.

Then she spoke. "Love you, Wilfred? I should just think I do—more than I can ever tell you or make you understand."

"I don't know about making me understand ! You see, I can do something in that line myself."

"Yes, dear one ; but it cannot mean as much to you as it does to me. In loving me, you have not only given me yourself, Wilfred, you have given me myself also. Until a woman has been loved by a man she is not a real woman, she is only a sort of imitation ; and I was getting so old, and so tired of waiting for the awakening that never came, that I was beginning to be afraid I should never become a real woman at all."

Westerham, in a perfect passion of tenderness, kissed the brown head that lay on his shoulder. There was so much of the woman in his nature—as there is in the nature of most men who possess the artistic temperament—that Esther's lack of youth and beauty

appealed to him as the presence of these qualities could never have done. The very things that would have repelled the ordinary masculine man only served to bind him to her still more closely. "My own darling," he whispered, "does it mean as much to you as that?"

"Yes, and much more besides. Your love has not only given me the kingdom of my own womanhood, but it has given me the earth and the fulness thereof as well. Until now, I have always loved Nature, but with a love that made me unhappy. The sight of a distant view, or of a field carpeted with buttercups, never failed to fill me with ecstasy; but the ecstasy was always tinged with sadness. Now the bluebells and the buttercups and the distant views fill me with pure happiness, and I seem to know the meaning of them all. And the meaning is *you*."

Thus it is with the sons and daughters of men when they are young, and Esther Wyvern was still a girl at heart in spite of her forty summers. The beauties of Nature stir them to a vague unrest until Love comes their way; and then they know why the fields are carpeted with flowers and the sky with stars: their vague unrest is changed into unsullied joy.

And afterwards—when Love has either passed on out of sight, or else has settled down into the daily routine of domestic peace—do the fields and the flowers and the distant hills lose their magic for the sons and daughters of men? Not so: there is a further and a higher stage, when the mountains and the sunsets and the flower-strewn fields bring a deeper and a more glorious message than they did in the days of youth: the message that they are but the expressions of a Love greater than any human love—but the earnest of a more perfect beauty and a more intense happiness yet in store. And then once again the sons and

daughters of men know why the fields are carpeted with flowers and the sky with stars, and why the beauty of a wood in spring or of a sunset in summer is sometimes almost too great to be borne : it is to remind them that they are also the sons and daughters of God.

So Westerham and his love sat together in the shade of the fine old beech-tree and sipped the cup of human happiness, until they saw the Duchess and Lady Westerham returning from an inspection of the latter's herbaceous border. They then unlocked their respective arms, and sat decorously upright on their respective chairs, while Esther gave a final injunction to her lover : "Don't tell them about it yet, Wilfred : let us keep our happiness to ourselves for this one day, and then I'll tell Mamma in the morning."

On that same Sunday afternoon Perkins sat surrounded by his three lady friends, like King Arthur and his three queens in the magic barge. Dinner was over in the servants' hall, and the four head servants had retired from presiding over that somewhat mixed assembly to take their Sabbath-day dessert in the more select and refined atmosphere of the housekeeper's room. Among the proletariat of the lower chamber Perkins and Mrs. Brown permitted no discussion, or even conversation, concerning the habits and the doings of that sacred institution, the Wyvern Family ; but this rule was relaxed in the dignified seclusion of the housekeeper's room. This small committee partook more or less of the nature of a Cabinet Council, as compared with the rough and tumble of the House of Commons, the latter popular assembly being represented by the social medley of the servants' hall : there were no reporters present, and all remarks uttered inside the sacred enclosure of Mrs. Brown's four walls were regarded as absolutely confidential,

and were never allowed to go beyond them. According to the unwritten law prevalent among well-trained servants in what are called "good places," this rule was rigorously kept; and Perkins and his three attendant queens would have considered it as unthinkable to report the doings of The Family to uninitiated ears, as would a Minister of the Crown to disclose to the outer world a Cabinet secret.

"I believe that your wish for Lady Esther to secure a suitable alliance is coming true, Miss Clark," Perkins genially remarked, as he sipped his glass of sherry and discussed his almonds and raisins; "if I'm not much mistaken, she and his lordship won't be long in making a match of it."

Clark bubbled over with innocent joy at the idea of a romance in high life so near home. "Just what I have been thinking for some time past, Mr. Perkins."

"I'm not one much for matrimony, having learnt by sad experience what it really is," said Mrs. Brown, as if other married people had only grasped the shadow of the Divine Ordinance, while it had been reserved for her, and her alone, to sound the tragic depths of the actual substance; "but if ever there was a marriage that I could approve of, it would be one between our dear young lady and his lordship. Lady Esther would be just the right mistress for the Hall, as I'm sure she'd have everything just as it was in her ladyship's time, and no ridiculous newfangled ways and improvements that a strange lady might be set upon."

"It would be nice, too, for her ladyship, having Lady Esther settled so near," said Parker, who, under her somewhat chilling demeanour, adored her mistress not one whit less than Mrs. Brown and Perkins did. "In fact I don't see how Lady Esther could marry any one at a distance, considering her ladyship's age: it

would be downright cruel, after staying with her ladyship all these years, to go and leave her now."

"I don't know about that, Miss Parker," said Perkins, speaking down from his higher altitude of masculine wisdom; "ladies have to lead their own lives and not the lives of their parents, in all classes of society, and it often quite upsets me to see single ladies left solitary after their parents' death, having, as you may say, given up all chances of a comfortable settling for their parents' sake, and missed the happiness of a *solitude o' ducks*."

"Husbands don't grow on every bush after you've passed thirty," snapped out Parker.

"And a good thing they don't," added Mrs. Brown, "or else folks would be picking them! Marriage is always more or less of a risk, and the older you get, the greater risk it is, and the less chance there is of happiness. I was turned thirty when I married Brown."

After the slight pause which was always given by courtesy after any reference to Mrs. Brown's matrimonial troubles, Perkins remarked, "Now, for my part, I should have thought it was just the other way, Mrs. Brown, and that the older people are, the more sense they would have in suiting themselves to what you might call each other's little peculiarities and avoiding what the French call a *Miss Alliance*." Although Perkins would have been terrified at the thought of any actual plunge into matrimony, he liked to toy with the idea, and he very much liked to feel that he was still young enough to be reckoned as a prize in the matrimonial market. Therefore any suggestion as to an age-limit in this department of life always ruffled his generally imperturbable spirit.

Mrs. Brown shook her head. "Then you think wrong, Mr. Perkins. It is very difficult to suit your-

self to a husband's little peculiarities, when those little peculiarities take the form of scullerymaids and under-housemaids; and the older you are when you are married, the sooner those little peculiarities are likely to show themselves." Like many matrons getting on in life, Mrs. Brown permitted herself a certain license of conversation before the unmarried portion of her own sex, which was apt to shock the more squeamish members of both sexes. This, in Perkins's eyes, was the housekeeper's only fault. As is the habit of many bachelors of uncertain age, he cherished a most exaggerated conception of the infantile innocence of all unmarried females. Of course, he had never put it into words; but deep down in his chivalrous old soul there lurked the idea that those ladies whom he would gallantly have described as "unappropriated blessings" never thought about anything less dazzlingly white than Madonna lilies, or more material than young-eyed cherubims. Therefore it never failed to distress him when Mrs. Brown kept on her shoes—and sometimes rather muddy shoes, too—when treading upon the virgin soil of Miss Parker and Miss Clark's maiden consciousness.

But the sweet-natured Clark soon restored his mental equilibrium. "Oh, how lovely it would be," she exclaimed, clasping her hands in girlish ecstasy, "if Lady Esther and his lordship did make a match of it! Think of the wedding and the trousseau and the bridesmaids' dresses! It would be a fair treat!"

"I should think Lady Esther would hardly have white satin and orange-blossom and bridesmaids at her age," said the uncompromising Parker; "a quiet wedding in her travelling-dress would be much more suitable as far as she is concerned, and much less fatiguing for my lady."

Clark's pretty blue eyes filled with tears at the mere suggestion of such a thing. "Oh, pray don't say so, Miss Parker! I couldn't bear the thought of Lady Esther being married in anything but white satin and orange-blossom. I'd as soon she was married in a registry office as in a travelling-dress; there seems nothing sacred about either of them as there does about white satin and 'The Voice that breathed o'er Eden.' I always cry at weddings, even if I don't know the parties that are being married—it all seems so solemn and beautiful; but if it was my own lady being married I know I should fairly cry my eyes out; and oh, how I should enjoy it!"

Perkins thoroughly approved of Miss Clark's sentiments: practically they were his own, though he would not have dared to say so before the Allied Powers. "And as for her ladyship," he added, "she'd stand it all right, mark my words! She stood Lady Eleanor's wedding, so she can stand Lady Esther's."

"She was three-and-twenty years younger," snapped Parker.

"So she was—so she was. Lady Eleanor was quite the *June fill*, as one might say, at that time, and her ladyship—though past her *premiere jeunesse*—was still what you might call in her prime. But though I can't deny as her ladyship might find it a bit tiring to have a proper wedding, with a reception after, and everything *come ill foot*, still I think it is but fair to Lady Esther for her to have the same sort of wedding as her sister had. After all, a lady's wedding is her own affair, and not her mother's!" The glass of sherry had flung wide the flood-gates of Perkins's French.

"That is so, Mr. Perkins—both at the time and afterwards—worse luck for her!" groaned Mrs. Brown, in whose case the sherry had unlocked the door of lurid

matrimonial memories, so that she was enjoying herself in her own way quite as much as Perkins was in his. "Still, perhaps it's all for the best, as I couldn't have borne for my dear mother to have to endure all that I had to put up with : she couldn't have stood it."

"I'm sure it's a wonder how you stood it yourself, Mrs. Brown," said Parker, nobly rising to the occasion.

"It is, Miss Parker—little short of a miracle, I call it, that Brown was taken and I was left, considering all that I had to bear for two long years. I'm certain if he hadn't been taken when he was I should have been : I couldn't have stood much more of him."

The others fairly quailed at the prospect of the alternative which Providence had so wisely avoided; so much so, in fact, that Perkins felt it incumbent upon him to administer to each of the ladies another half-glass, and to himself a whole one.

"She'd make a sweet wife, would Lady Esther," exclaimed Clark; "and in evening dress with a diamond tiara she'd look quite the Countess."

"In figure, but not in face," Miss Parker corrected her.

"She'd *be* the Countess," said Mrs. Brown sternly; "so it wouldn't matter what she *looked*. I'm not such a one for beauty as some that I could mention; in my opinion it's only skin-deep. I dare say it's all very well for actresses and ballet-girls and people of that kind to have pretty faces; in fact, the poor creatures have to—their living depends on it; but the Aristocracy" (Mrs. Brown always thought of the Aristocracy with a capital A, just as she always thought of the Bible with a capital B) "are independent of such things. There's something better than mere beauty, Miss Parker, and that's birth and breeding."

"Quite so, quite so, Mrs. Brown," said Perkins, the gentle warmth of the sherry in his veins making him even more conciliatory than usual. "As you say, mere beauty can spring from nothing, but it takes generations of refinement and what you might call *bong-tong* to produce the *genesis squaw* of the real Aristocracy." By which somewhat remarkable statement Perkins did not mean to enrol himself as a disciple of the doctrine of spontaneous generation; but secondarily to hurl scorn at the good looks of the proletariat, and primarily to pacify Mrs. Brown.

But, alas! the extra half-glass of wine had still further broken down the already inadequate fences which this good lady placed around the innocent susceptibilities of the unmarried. "The only thing against the match, to my mind, is that Lady Esther isn't as young as she has been, and it would be a dreadful pity if there wasn't an heir, and the title had to die out, and the property go trailing off to some distant cousin."

Perkins really did not know what to say, he was so distressed for what he called "the young ladies' ears" to be soiled by such a remark as this; yet, on the other hand, he was incapable of reproving Mrs. Brown; so he blushed crimson and cleared his throat, and refrained from meeting the eye of either of the spinsters, while the hardened matron calmly skated on as if the thin ice had never so much as cracked. "Still, taking everything into consideration, I do hope that his lordship will marry Lady Esther, and make her the mistress of the Hall in her dear Mamma's place. Nobody would carry out her ladyship's customs as Lady Esther would, and I couldn't bear to see all that lovely old china—in particular the Crown Derby coffee-cups—handed over to some strange

young lady that wouldn't know how to appreciate them."

Perkins sighed in mingled relief and sympathy. "And the best dessert-service, too, with the *rose do Barry* border and the portraits of French ladies in the middle: think of that going into what you might call strange hands! Often have I looked at them portraits after superintending the footmen setting out the dessert, and thought what beautiful faces the ladies had at the court of *Lewis Quinsey*. You always used to wash up that particular service with your own hands, if you remember, Mrs. Brown, it being too valuable, as you might say, to be entrusted into the hands of young folks; and I used to feel quite glad to think that no ignorant butterfingers would have the washing of those lovely faces." Perkins was always more sentimental than usual after his weekly glass of sherry at dessert, and as on this particular occasion the one glass happened to have been two, he was more sentimental than ever in consequence.

"It wasn't the beauty I minded, but the expense," replied Mrs. Brown. "Her ladyship told me that those dessert-plates were worth five pounds apiece, and I wasn't going to let any young idiots fling five-pound-notes down the waste pipe by smashing the plates and throwing away the pieces. I knew their thoughtless ways!"

"Lady Esther would feel just the same respect for the family portraits and the old china and the gold plate as her ladyship did," remarked Perkins; "in fact, perhaps more so, as they were her own relations, so to speak, and only her ladyship's relations-in-law. Though, after all, I suppose a good wife feels just as proud of her husband's things as she does of her own."

"Not at all, Mr. Perkins; quite the reverse. I'm sure I feel no pride in Brown's first wife, nor in that daguerreotype of her that hangs in my bedroom: I feel nothing but the deepest pity for the woman, whenever I look at it."

"I wonder you keep it, Mrs. Brown," remarked Parker. "If I married a widower, I couldn't bear to have pictures of his first wife papering the walls. I should throw them all behind the fire in pretty quick time."

"It just shows what a generous disposition Mrs. Brown has to keep it hanging up all these years," added Clark; "and it no ornament either!" It did not occur to the guileless young woman that if the portrait had been more of an ornament, Mrs. Brown might have been less likely to preserve it.

Mrs. Brown bridled gloomily. "I don't know about my generous disposition, Miss Clark, though thank you all the same for the compliment, which I take in the spirit in which it was spoken; but I do say it is a bit of a comfort when you are down-hearted to look at the picture of somebody who was as miserable as you are. It seems to make things more even."

"And they ought to be even, Mrs. Brown," murmured Perkins; "for I'm sure nobody in all the world deserves trouble less than you do, nor has had more of it." Which remark showed that—according to the fixed ritual of Sunday afternoons—the butler's permanently pacific state of mind was developing into a temporarily somnolent one, the passive love of peace being replaced by the active longing for rest: so the younger ladies discreetly withdrew to their own apartments, leaving the two old people to enjoy their afternoon nap.

CHAPTER VII

AN UNEXPECTED OBSTACLE

LORD WESTERHAM was seated at breakfast the next morning in a very enviable frame of mind. He had attained his heart's desire, namely, the love of the first woman he himself had ever loved; and the attainment of one's heart's desire is—just at the beginning, at any rate—a most satisfying state of affairs. Later on, the human heart is prone to become accustomed to the desire attained, and to set itself upon something still unattainable; but this progressive movement does not set in immediately. The attainment is always followed by a hiatus of complete content.

It is not to be supposed that Westerham had lived to the age of twenty-eight without experiencing more than one youthful fancy. He was far too human for such exemption. But these passing attachments had confined themselves to the outer courts of his affections, and had never penetrated into his Holy of Holies. Esther, however, had roused all that was highest and noblest and most chivalrous in his nature; she had appealed to the best in him, and the best had responded to her unconscious call. He had seen her beautiful soul shining through her plain face until he had almost come to find her face beautiful as well.

It is true that men will always fall in love with beauty; and it is true that the majority of men are only capable of perceiving the beauty which is visible to the outward eye; but it is also true that the minority,

who are able to see and to recognize beauty of spirit, will fall in love with it as certainly as their blinder brothers will with beauty of form. It has often been said that beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder; but this does not mean that beauty is subjective rather than objective, nor that it exists in the imagination of the one who possesses it. Beauty is a real and a tangible thing, and not merely a question of taste or fashion. But it depends upon the eyes of the beholder in so far as some eyes can pierce below the surface and some can only discern the obvious. Most people think they can see through a stone as far as most other people; but it takes a sculptor to see through the stone to the statue hidden within it. Most people can hear the piping of the birds and the rustling of the leaves on a May morning; but it takes an artist or a poet to hear the valleys break forth into singing, or to catch echoes of the chanting of the morning stars.

Not only did Westerham deeply and truly love Esther for what she was, but also for what she represented. To him she stood for all that was finely bred and delicately nurtured—for all the grace and order of an old civilization as compared with the vigour and bustle of a new one. She was to him as still waters or as silent woodlands—an incarnation of peace and repose. She was also to him an embodiment of all that was best in social life—an emblem of unconscious dignity and of ordered grace. To his inward ear she was a sacred oratorio; to his inward eye a stately minuet.

Therefore it came about that as Lord Westerham sat alone at breakfast at Wyvern's End, and dwelt in thought upon Esther's excellencies and upon his own good luck in winning the love of such a paragon, he was a very happy young man indeed. Only a few

years ago he had still been a lonely literary man of good family and no fortune, whose sole passport consisted of a distant and visionary coronet, more than partially obscured by three intervening lives; now he was an earl, with a large rent-roll and a most beautiful estate, and was engaged to a woman who possessed all the attributes that he most admired in womankind. Surely for the moment he was to be envied.

The butler's entry interrupted his reverie. "If you please, my lord, Lady Esther has called, and wants to see your lordship as soon as possible."

Westerham started from his seat, and blushed like a girl. Love had indeed changed his stately and reserved Esther for her to come to him before he had found time to go to her! He could hardly believe his ears.

"Lady Esther, did you say, Symonds?" he vaguely repeated, vainly endeavouring to hide his surprise and emotion at such an unexpected event.

But Symonds was one of those well-trained servants who perceive nothing while seeing everything. "Yes, my lord. And I showed her ladyship into the library, and told her that your lordship was just finishing breakfast."

"All right, I'll go to her ladyship at once, and you can take the breakfast things away—I've quite finished." And Westerham dashed out of the room, while Symonds leisurely summoned his attendant footmen to remove the remains of his lordship's meal.

Wilfred was immensely flattered at Esther's having come to him like this; it gratified him far more than it would have done had he been an older man or she a younger woman. The ordinary man always feels himself in a certain way superior to the woman of his

choice, and loves her all the more for her fancied inferiority; and the ordinary woman—if she be wise as well as ordinary—will do nothing to dispel this illusion. But when there is a marked disparity of years, and the balance is on the woman's side, the man—if he love her at all—will love her with a boyish adoration which he would never bestow upon a contemporary or a junior. He will worship the one, where he would only pet the others. As to whether the woman prefers to be worshipped or to be petted, that is merely a matter of the woman's taste. But, roughly speaking, she may assume that she will be either the one or the other according as to whether she is the senior or the junior of her lover.

Esther's obvious desire to see him again—a desire so strong that it caused her to act in direct opposition both to her character and to her traditions—went to Wilfred's head like wine. He could not help exulting, in a boyish way, at this tribute to his power. There was much of the boy in his composition, as well as much of the woman, otherwise he would never have loved and understood Esther as he did.

"I say, Esther," he cried, as he entered the library, and shut the door after him, "how splendid you are to come up so early! I'd have had breakfast two hours ago if I'd known you were coming, and would have gone across the park to meet you."

The room was so long, and his excitement was so great, that he had time to say all this before he came near enough to where Lady Esther was standing to see her face. But as soon as he did see it his own changed, and his expression of youthful joy was transformed into one of sorrowful bewilderment. For Esther's cheeks were pale from want of sleep, and her eyes were red with weeping, and she looked fully ten

years older than she had looked only yesterday evening.

"My darling, my own sweetheart, whatever is the matter?" Wilfred exclaimed, as he tried to take her in his arms. "Is your mother ill, or have you had bad news from Stoneham."

But Esther gently evaded his embrace—that embrace to which she had yielded in such a passion of ecstasy only yesterday. "No, Wilfred dear, there is nothing the matter of that kind. But I have come to tell you that we were both very foolish yesterday afternoon, and that I can never marry you."

Westerham's face went as white as hers. "Good heavens, Esther! what on earth do you mean? There is nothing against me; and surely we are old enough to please ourselves."

Esther's heart melted as she saw the misery in the face that she loved. It had been so bright with boyish gladness when he entered the room, and now she had wiped all the gladness out as if with a sponge. "Oh, my darling, my darling, don't mind so much!" she cried, as she threw her arms round his neck and drew the dark head on to her shoulder, and tried to comfort him as his mother would have done. At that moment the maternal element in her love was very strong.

But he would not be comforted so easily. He was a man as well as a boy, and he wanted explanations as well as endearments. "Come and sit beside me here, and tell me all about it," he said, drawing her down beside him on to one of the large settees which were dotted about the room; "do you mean to say that your mother makes any objection to our marriage?"

"No, oh no! She knows nothing at all about it; I haven't told her. And that is why I came so

early—to prevent you from telling her or anybody else.”

Wilfred's face was still a study of mystified pain. “Then what on earth is the matter? I wish you'd tell me the worst and put me out of my misery.”

Esther's lip quivered. It was agony to her to see him suffering. “The worst is only this: that I have lain awake all night thinking about it, and about the wonderfulness of your ever loving me; and I've decided that I never will—that it wouldn't be right to marry you.”

“But why—why, Esther? Have you got some fatal disease or something? Because if you have, I'll marry you all the quicker, and nurse you through it and make you well again, as the Brownings did.”

Esther laid her hand on his hair again. “My dearest, how good you are! As if I should let you do it!”

“But I should do it, whether you let me or not!”

“It isn't that I'm ill, Wilfred: it is something worse than that, because, as you say, illness is curable. But it is that I'm old—far too old for you—and there is no cure on earth for that.”

Westerham threw back his head and laughed aloud with the intensity of his relief. “Is that all? What a fright you've given me for nothing! I really thought there was something the matter.”

But Esther did not echo his laugh. Her face grew paler and her mouth more determined than ever: and Lady Esther Wyvern had always possessed a determined mouth. “I know you love me, Wilfred, I shall never doubt that. It will be my joy and my glory as long as I live that once you loved me.”

“*Once!* What a silly word to use! There is no

once about my love for you, you can make yourself jolly well sure on that score."

"And I love you too, dear: love you more than I can ever express or you can ever understand—more than I ever thought it possible for any creature to love another. And it is because I love you so much that I cannot and will not marry you."

By this time Wilfred had quite recovered his good spirits. Youth is very resilient. Besides, he did not know that expression on Lady Esther's mouth as well as her mother and sister knew it. He had never seen it before. They had.

"Sweetheart, you are talking nonsense," he said; "absolute nonsense!"

"No, I am not; and you must listen to me, Wilfred."

"I am listening; but I don't mind telling you that I think it's a most awful waste of time. And on such a lovely morning too—and the first morning of our engagement!"

But his lightheartedness only served to make Esther's eyes grow more sad and her mouth more determined. "I have been thinking it over," she said, as if repeating a lesson, "and I have decided that it would be wrong—positively wicked—to allow a man as young as you are, and with the world at your feet, to marry a faded old maid like me."

"Faded old nonsense!" he retorted, kissing her; "I never did hear anybody talk such rot! Why, I admire you most immensely, Esther: you know that well enough; I think you are the most elegant and distinguished-looking woman I have ever seen, and I shall be prouder still when you are my wife. So what on earth is all the fuss about?"

But Esther did not budge. "I know you feel like that now, dearest; I expected you would. But a day

will come when you will thank me for not marrying you."

"My thanks will be sent from a lunatic asylum then; that's all I can say."

"It would not be right to tie a man like you for life to a woman like me. It wouldn't be fair to you."

"That's my business; I am the judge of that. Do you think I could make you happy, Esther? Answer me straight."

"Of course you could: happier than any woman ever was before, or ever will be again. But I couldn't make you happy for long."

"That again is my business. If you think I couldn't make you happy, say so, and I'll never bother you again. But you say I can. Then the rest is my affair. If I didn't know you could make me happy, I shouldn't have asked you to marry me: I shouldn't have been such a fool. But as I know you can, you've only got to take my word for it and to set about doing it."

But Esther shook her head. "I couldn't be happy if I felt I had done wrong, and I shouldn't feel it was right to let you make me as gloriously happy as I know you could. My conscience would not allow me to take my happiness at the expense of yours."

Even yet Wilfred did not realize how serious the situation was—not even when Esther referred to her conscience. Again, had he been either Lady Westersham or the Duchess, he would have understood what a formidable and implacable foe Esther's conscience could be; but while he had discovered an Esther that they did not know, there had not yet been revealed to him the Esther that they did.

"You see," she continued, "to begin with I am twelve years older than you."

"I know you are, and I'm twelve years younger than you. If I can forgive you for the one, I don't see why you shouldn't forgive me for the other."

Westerham was beginning to see that things were serious, though he did not yet grasp how serious they were. But he knew that Lady Esther had a conscience a size too large for her—which is a very serious and troublesome misfit for anybody.

"And it isn't as if I were young for my age," Esther went on.

He contradicted her. "But you are: gloriously young. Your mind is as pure and your heart as fresh as if you were a girl of sixteen. That is why I love you so."

"But I'm not outwardly young: I'm not young to look at."

"You are. Your figure is like a girl's."

Esther took no notice of his interruption. "If I were a beautiful woman it would be different. Then I should feel myself a fit wife for you, in spite of the difference in age. But as it is, my conscience would never allow you to tie yourself for life—you, with your wealth and position and cleverness and charm—to a faded old maid."

"If you say that, it shows that you do not love me: that you don't even know what love is."

At this Esther's composure gave way, although her convictions remained firm: her lip quivered, and tears rolled down her cheeks. "Oh, my darling, my darling, don't say that! It is because I love you so much that I am taking this stand. If I loved you less I might be willing to snatch my happiness at the expense of yours. But loving you as I do, I cannot."

"But nobody asked you to snatch your happiness

at the expense of mine. All you are asked to do is, by being happy, to make me more so."

"It wouldn't make you permanently happy; and your happiness is the thing I desire most in the whole world."

"You've a funny way of showing your desire, and a still funnier one of trying to fulfil it," remarked Westerham dryly. He was beginning to be angry at last.

"Oh, Wilfred, don't be cross with me and so make it still harder for me to do what is right!"

Westerham got up from his seat by Esther, and began walking up and down the long room. "But it isn't right: that is the whole point of the argument."

"My conscience tells me that it is right, and we must obey our consciences, Wilfred."

"You've got a diseased conscience; I've always told you so: the sort of conscience that strains at gnats, and weighs anise and cummin, and lays upon men's shoulders burdens too heavy to be borne. I knew how it would be. You've given your conscience its head for so long that now it has broken loose and turned and rended you, and is trampling your happiness and mine into the dust."

But all in vain Wilfred argued and entreated and upbraided; nothing could alter Esther's decision. She had made up her mind that it would not be for his permanent happiness to marry a woman as old and unattractive as she was: and having thus made up her mind, nothing would induce her to marry him. Like many gentle and amiable people, Esther had a strong strain of obstinacy in her composition; and if her conscience ranged itself on the side of her will—especially if her inclinations ranged themselves against it—nothing on earth would move her.

She always aimed at the thing that she thought right : she generally aimed at the thing that she considered uncomfortable ; but when righteousness and discomfort were united in one goal, Lady Esther made a bee-line for this goal with undeviating accuracy and persistence.

In this instance the fact that she was thereby making herself and her lover very unhappy indeed, did not in any way shake her resolution : it rather served to confirm her in it. It was too deeply graven in the tablets of her mind for any argument to erase it, that the path of duty was of necessity stony, and that the ways of pleasantness were snares to the feet.

So she and Wilfred parted respectively in tears and anger, and subsequently resumed the contention again and again under similar conditions. And the result was always the same. The gate of Eden was shut-to in their faces, and they might no longer set foot beyond the magic portal. But the angel that guarded the gate was no Divine Messenger, but a monster manufactured after the manner of Frankenstein's : and the uplifted sword, that so effectively barred the way, was no weapon from Heaven's armoury, but a clumsy contrivance fashioned for the occasion out of the raw material of her ladyship's conscience.

CHAPTER VIII

PRESSURE

THIS sudden and unexpected cessation in the love-making between Lady Esther and her cousin could not fail to catch the family eye; and the perception of this hiatus—with Esther's explanation of it—roused much consternation in the family breast. It had seemed such a satisfactory solution of the unmarried-daughter problem that Esther should marry the new peer and carry on the late Earl's traditions in the old home: Lady Westerham not unnaturally shrank from the idea of a complete stranger—as Wilfred was when he succeeded to the title—ruling the little kingdom where she and her late husband had reigned for so long, and introducing new manners and new customs into the charmed circle of Wyvern's End. Until she and Esther returned from their long visit to the South of France, the possibility of Wilfred's falling in love with her younger daughter had never presented itself to the Dowager Countess. There had been a time, many years ago, when Lady Westerham expected young men to fall in love with Lady Esther, as they had previously fallen in love with Lady Eleanor. But the young men—even the ineligible ones—so completely failed to fulfil her ladyship's expectations on this score, that she in time left off cherishing such expectations, the demand for her maternal forethought having ceased to create the supply. She was one of those typical mid-Victorian

matrons who would have considered it worldly to understudy Heaven in the making of good marriages for their daughters, but who, on the other hand, were quite ready to lend a helping hand in the prevention of marriages which were not quite so good.

Her elder daughter's numerous love-affairs had been a source of distress to Lady Westerham, and her younger daughter's lack of love-affairs had pained her none the less keenly. She was one of those absolutely normal mothers who detest equally the men who want to marry their daughters and the men who do not. She disapproved of love-making, she disapproved still more of celibacy, and she disapproved most of all of a marriage that was not based upon love. But she never called it "love": the word somehow shocked her: she always spoke of it as "affection."

When, however, she and Esther returned from abroad to find, so to speak, the new man in possession—and when the new man showed such obvious admiration for his cousin several times removed—a warm appreciation of the beneficent workings of Providence slowly welled up in Lady Westerham's mind. Being Esther's mother, she did not realize the disparity in years as an outsider would have done: to her, both the Duchess and Lady Esther were still "the girls." Neither did she realize—though she had received many proofs of it—Esther's lack of charm for the opposite sex: she put her daughter's single state down rather to the opposite sex's lack of taste. But she did go to the length of considering Esther a most fortunate young woman in having attracted so eligible a husband, though she regarded Westerham a still more fortunate young man in having secured for Wyvern's End so admirable a successor to herself.

But although Wilfred's love for Esther did not sur-

prise the Countess as much as it surprised other people, Esther's rejection of that lover, which Esther soon confided to her, was more astounding to her mother than to anybody else. The whole family were taken aback at this unlooked-for development; but the Mershires had always recognized that there was "something queer," as they phrased it, in Esther's views of life, and Wilfred—in spite of his being the chief sufferer from it—thoroughly understood Esther's attitude of mind, though he sorely deprecated it. To her mother, however, the culprit was still a helpless and obedient child, whose undeniable obstinacy could not long prevail against parental authority, and whose conscience was still as wax in her elder's hands. And as the days passed on, and Esther was still obdurate in refusing to marry Wilfred, Lady Westerham became very much upset indeed, all the more so as Esther's misery was obviously so overwhelming that the anxious mother began to fear for her child's health.

"But surely, Mamma, you would not like me to do what I felt to be wrong," pleaded poor Esther for the hundredth time.

"Certainly not, my love; but there is nothing wrong in getting married: quite the reverse: and especially to such an excellent young man as Wilfred. I am naturally, as your mother, a far better judge of what is right and wrong than you could ever be."

"But if I feel it is wrong, it is wrong to me. I cannot disobey my own conscience."

"Of course not, my dear; but I can assure you there is nothing wrong in getting married; your dear father and I would not have done so if there had been; and I feel this would be a most excellent marriage both for you and for Wilfred. I should die quite happy if I

knew that you were settled at Wyvern's End to carry on all my ideas there, and to look after all my poor people. I really should not like to think of any strange young woman being the mistress at Wyvern's End; and Wilfred—nice as he is, and much as I like and respect him—has been brought up among such peculiar people that it was quite within the range of possibility that he might have married some utterly impossible person. And think how terrible that would have been—especially with us living at the Dower House, and therefore obliged to be more or less intimate with her!”

Poor Esther groaned. It seemed so impossible to get any of them to see the matter from her point of view. “I wasn't thinking of what was best for me, or for Wyvern's End, or even for you, Mamma: I was only thinking of what was best for Wilfred.”

“Well then, I can assure you, my love, that a marriage with you would be the best thing in the world for Wilfred. You are of good family, are intellectual and accomplished, and thoroughly competent to adorn the position and to fulfil the duties of Wilfred's wife. I am not proud, and I trust I know how fleeting is the value of all earthly rank or wealth; but, all the same, I could never bear to see some ill-mannered, low-born young woman succeed to my name and position. I should feel it an insult to your dear father's memory.”

“Oh yes, Mamma, I could fill the position right enough: I know all the ropes. I am quite good enough for the peer, but I feel I am not good enough for the man.” Esther spoke bitterly, but her irony was entirely lost on her mother.

“But, my dear, you cannot dissociate the two, and to my mind it is rather ill-bred and socialistic to

attempt to do so. It reminds me of a vulgar Scotch song people used to sing when I was a girl, something about a 'guinea-stamp,' and 'a man's a man for a' that.' I never understood the song in the least, or wished to do so; but I remember I used to wonder what 'guinea-stamps' were used for. I should imagine for some official business—probably in a Government office."

Esther fairly wrung her hands. She was so very miserable, and so alone in her misery. "Don't you see, Mamma, I am old and plain, and Wilfred is young and good-looking? I could never make him happy after his first fancy had worn off."

"My dearest child, I totally disagree with you with regard to Wilfred's appearance. He has an intelligent face and always looks a gentleman; but nevertheless he is decidedly plain. I cannot imagine how you can call him good-looking!" Like all quondam beauties, Lady Westerham was very severe in her standard of good looks.

Esther gave up her lover's claim to beauty at once; she had a much more important matter about which to argue. "But you cannot deny that he is young: he is only twenty-eight and I am forty. He will still be young as men go when I am quite an old woman. He will only be fifty-eight when I am seventy!"

"Ah, my child! how often must I tell you not to meet trouble before it comes, or to invent dangers so far ahead! We are mercifully not called upon to deal to-day with the difficulties of thirty years hence. Personally I think it best for a husband and wife to be much the same age, as your dear father and I were; but I have come across equally happy unions where there was a considerable disparity in years."

But Esther stuck to her guns. "I feel it would be

spoiling Wilfred's youth to tie him to an old maid like me, and that it would not be right to do so."

"Young people—and you are still young to me, my dear—are not as good judges of what is right and wrong as their parents are; and I can assure you that there would be nothing wrong in your marrying Wilfred, even if I admit, for the sake of argument, that all your premises are correct. Given that you are an old maid now—which I deny—you would not be one when you were Wilfred's wife: given that you are not young or beautiful, he must have thought you both—or thought you something better than both—or else he would not have formed so deep an attachment to you. It seems to me, my dear, that you are minding Wilfred's business instead of your own, and minding it very badly."

Lady Westerham might not be as clever as her daughters, but she was a great deal more shrewd and sensible than the younger of them. Nevertheless, nothing that she could say shook that daughter's resolution in the very least. The passion for martyrdom—and it is a passion with some people—was strong upon Esther Wyvern; and when once the passion of martyrdom has seized upon a woman, it takes more than wild horses to drag her back from the suttee or the sisterhood or the sacrificial altar, or any other form of self-immolation which is prevalent in her particular time and place.

Her mother and her lover were, however, not the only ones who tried to shake Lady Esther's resolution. The Duchess motored over from Stoneham continually, and brought the whole battery of her conversational powers to bear upon her unhappy sister.

"Of course, I see what you mean about being older than Wilfred and all that sort of thing," she urged

on one of the days of the long and hard-fought campaign against Lady Esther's conscience; "it would be no good pretending that you were not, because if you did, Time and *The Peerage* would soon show you up: I mean one of those silly *Peerages* that tell the women's ages—not *Burke*, of course. But if Wilfred doesn't mind your age, I can't for the life of me see why you should."

"He doesn't mind it now, but he will some day."

"And you are afraid that then he'll go flirting off after pretty girls? Well, if the worst came to the worst and he does, you'll still be Countess of Westersham at Wyvern's End, which will be much more amusing for you than just being Lady Esther Wyvern at the Dower House."

Esther's pale cheeks flushed with anger. "Oh, Eleanor! how dare you ever suggest such a thing as that I should be afraid of Wilfred's flirting with other women after he was married to me? Such a horrible idea, and one so disloyal to him, never entered my head!"

"Didn't it?" remarked Eleanor dryly. A married woman must be singularly devoid of humour if she derives no amusement from her single sister's ideas as to the thoughts, ways and works of the opposite sex.

"Of course it didn't! I know him too well. I wasn't thinking of myself at all in the matter: I am certain that, whatever happened, he would always be a perfect husband to me. My point is that I couldn't make him happy, I am so old and plain and dull: even my gratitude to him for loving me could not cure that."

"Certainly it wouldn't, and it would be the most unsuitable remedy to apply! A woman's husband always shares that woman's opinion of herself, and

if she begins by being such a goose as to thank him for marrying her, he'll soon begin to think he's made a pretty bad bargain. Gratitude is not the virtue of a giver; and it is essential to married happiness that the man should believe that he received the blessing, and not that he bestowed it."

The sisters moved along parallel lines, so that there was no hope of their meeting except in infinity. The Duchess was by no means a selfish woman: she would cheerfully have allowed herself to be cut into pieces if she could thereby have benefited her husband and children, though she would have been quite conscious that in so doing she was treating them very well indeed. But the absolute selflessness of Lady Esther—not merely the readiness to sacrifice self, but the complete unconsciousness of such an entity as self—was a thing undreamed of in her Grace's philosophy.

"I can see," Esther continued, regardless of Eleanor's words of wisdom, "that I am involving Wilfred in unhappiness now, but that will pass. He is young, and young people soon get over things: they are not like us. And when he has got over it, he will meet some beautiful girl of his own age, and marry her and be happy ever after."

"And where do you come in?" asked the Duchess, who was really attached to her sister, and did not like to see her suffer.

"I don't come in at all," was the quiet answer; "that's the whole point."

"But you do. It takes two to make a marriage, just as surely as it takes two to make a quarrel. And if you *will* harp upon the question of age, I think you are most awfully lucky at your age to get such a good chance of settling. A woman of forty is fortunate to get a husband at all; and if you secure not only

a kind heart, but a coronet as well, I must confess that you have brought your simple faith and your Norman blood to the best market."

"Eleanor, I cannot make you understand that it is of Wilfred I am thinking, and not of myself. The love of such a man is the most perfect bliss that I could ever imagine, though his worldly position or possessions do not affect me in the least. It would be an ideal marriage for me, I admit; but what of him? I shall be old before he is even middle-aged."

Eleanor shook a warning finger. "Well, be careful: I think you are taking upon yourself an enormous responsibility. Suppose Wilfred does meet this exquisite young thing that you're so full of, and falls in love with her and marries her, which I agree with you is quite on the cards—ten to one she'll be one of the stars of the ballet; and think how dreadful it will be to see a person in pink tights standing in Mamma's shoes!"

"But surely there is a middle course between me and a person in pink tights," expostulated Esther.

"Men on the rebound never take a middle course: and it is such a mercy that Westerham—having just come into money and a title—didn't begin with the pink tights instead of with you. That would have been the natural turn of events, and I think it is greatly to his credit that he didn't take it. As a rule, when collaterals come suddenly into an unexpected title, they are apt to be a little top-heavy at first until they shake down a bit and learn their way about; and that is just the time when the pink tights are dangerous. My opinion is that instead of blaming you in the future for taking advantage of his youth and inexperience by marrying him, as you seem to expect,

Wilfred will rather thank you for having prevented him from marrying somebody infinitely worse."

But though Esther smiled, she remained immovable. "You see, Eleanor," she continued, rather shyly, "it seems rather vulgar to put it into words, but what I feel about Wilfred is this: I am the first woman of our sort that he has ever known at all intimately. I dare say his mother's friends were quite nice and clever and all that; but they were different from us. He thinks that he is attracted by me myself, but he isn't: he is attracted by my manners and my surroundings and the way I have been brought up. I can't express it properly, but you know what I mean."

The Duchess nodded.

"But when he goes about more," Esther went on, "and gets to know the right people, he'll find that all the women are like me, and young and good-looking as well: and then he'll see how foolish he was to mistake the rule for the exception. But I hate to say this, even to you: it sounds so dreadfully snobbish."

"Never mind that; better be snobbish than socialistic any day, and nowadays everybody is either one or the other. It used to be said that every Englishman loved a lord, but now it seems that every Englishman hates a lord: and I'm sure it is much more Christian and well-behaved to love than to hate."

Esther gave a pitiful little smile. "Then I must be a snob, for I certainly love a lord."

"Good for you!" exclaimed her sister, with a merry laugh. "You really would have quite a pretty wit of your own if it weren't so overgrown with conscience. Do you remember that lovely picture by Burne-Jones of the Briar-Rose? Well, your conscience is just like that. It grows and grows till it covers and smothers everything else, even the sleeping

Princess. But your conscience even goes one better than the Briar-Rose: for the Briar did stop at interfering with the Prince; but your conscience has smothered the Prince as well, and stopped him from kissing the Princess and waking her."

Esther's lip quivered. The random shot had gone home. "It didn't quite do that," she murmured; "I only wish it had!"

CHAPTER IX

THE DUKE'S OPINION

FINDING that her own and her mother's continuous charges of argumentative artillery had no effect whatsoever upon her misguided sister, the Duchess decided to bring her most powerful ally to help her in the field of battle. Underneath her somewhat frivolous manner she concealed a thoroughly kind heart and warm affections, and it distressed her more than she would admit to see Esther's life being spoiled by what her Grace regarded as an absurd and unnecessary sacrifice.

Therefore it came to pass that as the Duke of Mer-shire was comfortably reading his *Times* in his own special sanctum at Stoneham Abbey on the following morning, in bounced the Duchess and perched herself on the arm of her husband's easy chair. Like many women of strong vitality and good animal spirits, her Grace—though not particularly young in figure—was remarkably youthful in her movements. Her form might be that of a woman of five-and-forty, but her actions were those of a girl of fifteen.

"Tammy, I've got something most frightfully important to say to you," she began.

"Well, what is it?" asked the Duke, looking up with a smile and putting his arm round her comely waist. "Something gone wrong with the herbaceous border, or the last new frock from Paris; or only the final collapse of thirteenth-century masonry, and the Abbey tumbling down about our ears?"

"Don't be foolish, Tammy. It's something you've got to do at once. You've got to motor over to the Dower House with me this morning and tell Esther to marry Westerham."

"Good heavens!"

"It's no use saying 'Good heavens!' You've got to come, whether you like it or not. I thought I could pull it off without you, but I find I can't."

"But, my dear, it's not at all a job in my line. I'm no hand at match-making: I leave all that to you."

"You don't know what you can do till you try," was the Duchess's wise remark.

"You likewise don't know what you can't do till you try," was the Duke's still wiser answer. "And I think that is the more common form of education," he added.

"Well, at any rate, you've got to come with me to the Dower House and manage Esther's love-affair for her. You see, she has never had one before, and she doesn't know how to conduct it properly herself."

"But with such an expert for her sister I should have thought she could have dispensed with my feeble assistance."

"And so I should have thought, too; but, strange to say, I've failed!"

"Then if such an expert as yourself has failed, where would an ignoramus like me come in?" asked the Duke, who had been led by his better half through all the labyrinths of Esther's scruples, in so far as her Grace was capable of comprehending and describing them.

"Oh! you've got a great deal of influence, Tammy—more than you've any idea of. It often surprises

me what a lot of importance people attach to your opinion ! ”

“Thank you, my dear. How succinctly you put things ! I often envy you your turn of expression.” The Duke was one of those big solid men who inspire with confidence everybody who sees them. His strength and solidity were typically English : as were also his large, heavy frame, his square, clean-shaven face, and his ruddy and fresh complexion. Being typically English, there was perhaps a strain of ponderousness in his appearance ; but when he was amused he had a habit of gurgling audibly and shaking inwardly, which was highly infectious and wholly delightful, and which made all those who had ever witnessed and shared his mirth (the two being synonymous) forget from that moment that his Grace had ever struck them as either solemn or ponderous.

He gurgled now, and the Duchess felt the arm-chair shake with his suppressed laughter. But she was not to be turned from her point. “You are very good at persuading people to do things when you take the trouble,” she said ; “you know you are. You look so big and sensible and important that anything you advise seems as if it must be the right and wise course to take.”

“You yourself are often singularly strong in resisting that impression.” And the Duke gurgled again.

“Oh ! I know you so well, you see.”

“Moreover, given that your too-flattering estimate of the impression that my appearance creates in the minds of strangers is correct,” continued the Duke, “it doesn’t follow that they would regard me as an authority in matters of the heart. They would be more inclined to consult me about land-taxes than about love-affairs, I should imagine.”

The Duchess laughed. "They'd consult you about anything, you look so awfully reliable. I'm sure when I see you making a speech in the House of Lords—one of those dull, wise sort of speeches, you know, with columns of figures on bits of paper in your hat—I feel you are quite a father of the State."

"That may be; but fathers are not the sort of people whom we consult first as to our love-affairs. We generally consult them last; and then the consultation is usually a matter of necessity rather than of choice."

"Well, anyhow you persuaded me to marry you: and if you did that, I am sure you can persuade Esther to marry Westerham."

"Come, come, Nell, you are drawing it a bit too strong there! I asked you to marry me, I confess; but I can't for the life of me see where the persuasion came in."

"Don't be so horrid!" The Duchess was enjoying herself immensely. She always loved a battle of words with a foeman worthy of her steel. "You are sadly under-estimating my last powers of attraction."

"Not at all. It is you, my dear child, who are over-estimating my present powers of persuasion."

The lady tossed her head. "All the same, you were very much in love with me."

"I both was and am: I never attempted to disown the soft impeachment. But that didn't prevent you from being very much in love with me. In fact, I rather think it tended to increase your affection. Understand me, I am not for one moment denying that, had it been necessary, my powers of persuasion would have been exerted to their uttermost in order to win you for my wife; but fortunately, thanks to

your kindness, the necessity never arose." And the Duke drew his wife down to him and kissed her.

But she soon wriggled herself upright again on her perch. "I wish you'd talk sense, Tammy, instead of telling horrible untrue fibs about my running after you."

"In one moment. But first explain, please, what a true fib is if mine are untrue ones."

"Don't be silly! Tell me what we can say to Esther to convince her of her folly. You must help me: you really must!"

The Duke's genial face grew grave. "Well, first of all, I am not quite as certain as you are that it is such folly: it seems to me very much like sense—although sense obtained at a tremendous cost. If you want me to be perfectly candid with you, Nell—much as I love and respect Esther—I am not altogether sure that she is not sensible in refusing to marry Westerham."

The Duchess exclaimed "Et tu, Brute!" or words to that effect; the exact words she used being, "Oh dear, oh dear, you too! I never thought you'd turn against me, Tammy!"

"Neither did—nor do—I. But we must try to be sensible, my dear, and enter into Esther's feelings on this matter."

"Nothing would induce me to enter into anything so silly! I'd as soon enter into a lunatic asylum! And I think it is horrid to let such a thing as sensibleness come into the question of falling in love and getting married. It is like studying eugenics, or some detestable modern thing like that!"

The Duke smiled. "I am sure Esther is incapable of understanding, or even of wishing to understand, such a subject as eugenics; but, all the same, people

must be sensible in dealing with an event so important as marriage. You are so delighted—and not unnaturally so—at Westerham's having fallen in love with Esther, that you have rather lost your sense of proportion. And, of course, you look at it solely from her point of view and not from his. You would not be the good sister you are if you did not. But Esther—with an unselfishness as rare as it is admirable—looks at the matter from Westerham's side of the question, and upon my life I cannot say that she has come to a wrong conclusion!”

The Duchess was as much surprised as she was annoyed. Her husband so rarely disagreed with her that when he did she resented it as she would have resented an earthquake or a volcanic eruption.

“Nobody loves and admires Esther more than I do, as you know,” the Duke continued; “but I cannot truthfully say that I consider her a suitable wife for a young fellow like Westerham. She isn't lively enough, to begin with. Now supposing it was Jocko who wanted to marry a woman almost old enough to be his mother. You know you'd be dreadfully disappointed.”

“No, I shouldn't. I made up my mind ages ago that Jocko is sure to marry a girl out of the first row of the *Gaiety* chorus; so that anything else would be a pleasant surprise. At any rate, he can't disappoint me.”

“Unless he marries a girl out of the second row.”

The Duchess bent down and imprinted a kiss on the top of her husband's sparsely covered crown. “Oh! Tammy dear, you really are delightful to talk to, even when you are driving me to the verge of madness. But, you know, in your way you are just as stupid and tiresome as Esther. It's funny how all

my life I've had to do with stupid people ! Papa was very stupid at times ; and though I adore Mamma, I have now and again come across traces of stupidity even in her."

"Poor old Nell ! Still, it has proved a most wholesome discipline in producing the opposite result in your charming self."

"Oh, I'm all right : not much stupidity in me !" retorted her Grace. Then she disengaged herself from her husband's encircling arm, and got up from her somewhat precarious seat and stood sternly in front of him. "Why didn't you say all this before ?" she demanded. "I've done nothing but talk about Esther's folly for the last fortnight, and you never once told me that you are as idiotic as she is ! I thought all the time that I was talking to a sensible man."

The Duke stretched himself lazily in his easy chair, and looked up at his avenging goddess with amusement. "Well, to begin with, you didn't give me much chance of telling you anything, if you remember : you were talking yourself hard all the time. Besides, what was the good of interrupting your eloquent and instructive soliloquy ? I was enjoying and profiting by it too much. But when you come and ask me actively to interfere, it is a totally different matter. I cannot go over to the Dower House and deliberately advise your sister to take a step which I consider would eventually lead to misery both for herself and Westerham. Now can I ?"

The Duchess wrung her hands. "My poor, dear Tammy, I believe you are developing a conscience, too !"

"Hardly as bad as that ; but I confess to the inward stirring of certain rough and rude principles."

"Then there is not any use in your going to the Dower House : not an atom of use at all !" exclaimed the Duchess, with an air of finality.

"Not the slightest use, my dear; that is what I have been saying all the time."

"You'd be like that man in the Bible—Balaam, wasn't it?—who was sent to curse the people, and upset everything by blessing them instead."

"Very like him, and in more ways than one," replied the Duke enigmatically.

"I suppose you are going to say because he took his ass with him, and the ass was an exceptionally great talker?"

The Duke rose slowly from his chair. "I was not going to say anything of the kind. I never say the obvious thing. I was merely going to remark—had you given me time and opportunity—that I was like Balaam in so far as that, when he went on that particular journey, there was an angel in the way."

The merry blue eyes twinkled. "Quite the right answer, Tammy. But stop a bit. Which do you mean is the angel—Esther or me?"

The big man stooped and kissed his wife. "I repeat, I never say the obvious thing," he replied, as he strolled leisurely out of the room.

The Duchess looked after him with love in her eyes. "I wonder which he did really mean," she said to herself. "I believe it was Esther, after all."

CHAPTER X

A FELT WANT

"I WISH, my love, that you would try to eat a little more," said Lady Westerham, gazing affectionately at her younger daughter across the breakfast-table: "I think it is so important to begin the day with a good breakfast. Your dear father always did so; and I believe it was to this custom that he owed his excellent health."

"I have had quite enough, thank you, Mamma: I'm not at all hungry."

"But you ought to be hungry at your age, my dear," persisted the Countess, in the peculiar tone of voice—rather high-pitched and in a minor key—which she reserved for all who were afflicted or distressed in mind, body or estate. Her daughters called it her "poorly voice."

"I'm really all right; but I never do feel hungry in this hot weather." Lady Esther's face belied her words: anything further from "all right" than her wan face and heavy eyes it would be difficult to imagine. Her cheek had never been "damask" at the best of times: and now that "concealment, like a worm i' the bud," had begun to feed upon it, the consequent "green and yellow melancholy" was apparent to everybody.

"Take an egg, my love: it will do you good," entreated her mother, who was of Mr. Wodehouse's

classical opinion that "a small egg" could not hurt any one.

Lady Esther obediently took the small egg, which she had not the slightest intention of eating, and began tapping the shell in an absent-minded manner: but she had not progressed far in her work of destruction, before Perkins broke through all custom and precedent by incontinently flinging down the plate of hot toast he was in the act of handing to Lady Esther, and rushing to the window.

When a well-trained servant suddenly lays aside the livery of conventionalism and shows symptoms of a nature as human as our own, the effect is similar to that produced by an outbreak on the part of one of the great forces of Nature—a combination of amazement tinged with awe and tempered by a considerable amount of discomfort: such was the effect produced upon Lady Westerham and her daughter when the excellent Perkins threw down upon the table the plate of hot toast and rushed to the window. He had been their butler for more than thirty years, and never had he treated the buttered toast with such disrespect before! But before their ladyships had time to express their surprise, the culprit himself explained his actions.

"Excuse me, my lady, but I fear there has been an accident! There's his lordship's new horse galloping about the park with an empty saddle. He is a nasty-tempered brute, but his lordship would try himself to teach him to jump over hurdles at the bottom of the park: and he has evidently been too much for his lordship."

By this time both the ladies were on their feet and at the window. "Run down to the jumps yourself, Perkins," said Lady Westerham, "and see what has

happened, and take Frederick and Frank with you to help in case of need."

With that avidity for misfortune common to their class, Perkins and his footmen lost no time in obeying Lady Westerham's mandate; and she and her daughter were left gazing through the dining-room window at the park, across which not only Perkins and his followers but also some of the men from Wyvern's End were running, as the riderless horse had been seen from the Hall as well as from the Dower House. Esther's face was as white as a sheet of paper, but her fine breeding stood her in good stead: she neither shrieked nor fainted, but held herself erect, and braced herself to meet with fortitude whatever trouble was in store for her.

"Let us come out on to the terrace," said Lady Westerham, seeing that Esther needed the fresh air to revive her; "we shall see better from there what is going on."

So the two women stood on the terrace and waited, with courage and calmness, for the news which was of such vital importance to them both—to Esther on account of her lover, to Lady Westerham on account of her child.

As she stood with her mother upon the terrace, with the outward self-possession which was a heritage to her from her long line of ancestors, Lady Esther lifted up her soul in a perfect agony of prayer. First, the human part of her cried out to the God who made her that at all costs the life of her lover might be spared: and then the sanctified side of her nature asserted itself, and she earnestly besought that she might have strength to utter from her heart the petition, "Thy Will be done." For Esther Wyvern was one of those saintly yet misguided Christians who believe that sub-

mission to the Divine Will means merely an un murmuring acceptance of sorrow, or a patient endurance of suffering: forgetting that the petition runs, "Thy Will be done in earth as it is in heaven"—where there is neither sorrow nor sighing, and where all tears shall be for ever wiped away. So that the perfect fulfilment of the inspired prayer is no meek acquiescence in a painful discipline, but rather a joyous working together for good, on the united parts of God and man. Men and women are apt to forget that when they pray "Thy Will be done," they are not humbly accepting sorrow, but are instead hastening the time when there shall be no more sorrow nor sighing, neither shall there be any more pain. It was by transgression of God's Will that these things came upon mankind; and therefore it is only by submission to His Will that these things—which are contrary to that Will—shall be done away with.

After an eternity of waiting—which in reality lasted about a quarter of an hour—a small procession appeared winding its way across the park and carrying something upon a hurdle.

"You had better go and meet them, my dear, and see what is the matter," said Lady Westerham, who understood her daughter better than that daughter imagined, and who knew that—though meeting trouble half-way may be a foolish thing to do—standing still and watching it coming is sometimes an infinitely more painful one; since action of any kind is always a help to endurance.

Esther flew like an arrow from a bow and met the little procession half-way across the park: and as she flew, her mother in turn lifted up the petition "Thy Will be done," by which she meant—if the meditations of her heart were laid bare—that she, so to speak,

accorded permission to the Deity to slay Wilfred if He so willed it, though she still hoped that He would on this occasion waive His Divine prerogative, and allow instead her will to be done and Wilfred be permitted to live. That the God, Whom she thus ignorantly worshipped, cared infinitely more for her daughter's happiness than she did herself, and that He never denied His children any good thing, except in order to give them some infinitely better thing in its place, never occurred to her.

Beneath the black waistcoat and stoical demeanour of an ideal butler, Perkins hid a warm and tender heart; so, on perceiving the approach of his young mistress, he detached himself from the little procession and ran to meet her as fast as his large bulk and scanty breath would permit, shouting at the top of his voice, "It's all right, my lady: his lordship's not much hurt!"

On hearing this gospel of good tidings, Esther stood still for a second and lifted up her heart in thanksgiving to the Deity Who—as she believed—had, for this once, allowed her will to be done instead of His: and surely He, Who knoweth whereof His children are made, and remembereth that they are but dust, forgave the misunderstanding of His love which marred her praise for the sake of the gratitude which prompted it.

"It's all right, my lady," Perkins repeated, as he stood still and slowly regained his breath: "the new horse threw his lordship at the big jump, and——"

"And where is he hurt?" Esther interrupted him.

"His lordship's head and back are all right, but we think his leg is broken, so we have sent a man off at once to Grotham for the doctor."

"Is he conscious?"

"Perfectly, my lady—only a little bit shaken. I'm sure it's a mercy that his lordship fell on his leg and not on his head."

By this time Esther had reached the procession, which halted at her approach; and as she saw the man she adored lying prone upon a hurdle, looking very white and ill, the mother-love, which is an ingredient in the lover-love of all good women, flooded her heart with an overwhelming rush, and she longed to lay the white face upon her breast and cover it with kisses.

On seeing her, the invalid twisted his white lips into an apology for a smile. "I'm all right, Esther," he said; "there's nothing to worry about! That brute of a new horse threw me, and I think he has broken my leg."

"I'm so thankful it is nothing worse, Wilfred," replied Esther, with an equally ineffective smile. "You must get home as quickly as you can and have it set."

Whereupon the procession resumed its way, and Esther went back to the Dower House to relieve the anxiety of her mother. Even when her own heart had been wrung almost to breaking-point, Esther put her mother's anxiety before her own, and did not go to the Hall to hear the doctor's verdict until Lady Westerham's mind had been set at rest.

After that there followed a blissful time for Esther. Perkins's diagnosis proved correct; and the doctor found there was nothing wrong with Lord Westerham but a few bruises and a broken leg. Esther was one of the women who are at their best in a sick-room: she was a born nurse, and a sick-room, unshadowed by a cloud of the slightest anxiety, was an ideally happy hunting-ground for her. She spent the greater

part of every day at the Hall, sitting with Wilfred, and reading to him, and talking to him, and writing letters for him, and, in short, making herself indispensable to him. She felt that she was having the time of her life, and she made the very most of it. Although Westerham was not seriously ill, he was too ill to be in the mood for love-making: it was enough for him to feel that Esther was there, and that he loved her and she loved him, but he was not equal to the trouble of putting the thing into words. So they just drifted; and Esther rested in an atmosphere of perfect bliss. Probably if Esther had intended to marry him she would have wanted him to put the thing into words and to talk about it. A woman always wants to put things into words and talk about them, however ill she, or anybody else, may be. To a woman love-making is a medicine which will cure any sickness of soul or body; but to a man it is a wine to quicken pulses and to gladden the heart, but hardly a beverage suited to the sick-room.

Lady Westerham and the Duchess could not conceal their gratification at the turn which events had taken. They argued—and argued rightly—that when it became clear to the ultra-unselfish soul of Esther how extremely uncomfortable illness is in a house where there is no presiding feminine genius, she would see for herself that a new Countess of Westerham was not a luxury but an absolute necessity at Wyvern's End.

Lady Westerham belonged to the generation of mothers who played the part of Providence, so to speak, from the prompter's box, and who never actually appeared upon the stage of their daughters' life-dramas. She would have considered it somewhat indelicate to interfere openly in her children's love-

affairs, and contented herself with pulling strings which were hidden from the vulgar gaze. But her elder daughter had no such scruples, having outgrown alike the stern Victorian reticence and the rigid Victorian modesty, and was as ready to give advice to her female friends with regard to their future husbands as she was to proffer it later with regard to their future children.

"Mamma's reserve and reticence simply tire me out," she remarked to her sister, in a sudden revolt against the maternal tradition; "I've no use for them. I don't know why she can't say things right out, as I do, instead of humming and hawing and beating about the bush, and making out everything to be quite different from what it really is."

Esther looked shocked, as she always did when the Duchess spoke disrespectfully of the parental training. "Oh, Eleanor, I wish you wouldn't say things like that."

"Why not, if they are true? Of course I'm devoted to Mamma, and think her a splendid woman, but I wish she wouldn't wrap things up so. I should just love to hear what she really thinks and feels about anything or anybody, and not what she believes she ought to think and feel. Now to hear her speak about Papa, for instance; you'd think he'd been the cleverest man and the greatest orator that ever lived; and yet she must have known as well as we did how dull his talk was, and how heavy were his speeches!"

"But, Eleanor, you wouldn't like her to admit it even if she did know it—and especially now that he is dead?"

"Yes I should, and I can't see that being dead makes any difference. If Tammy had been dead for fifty years I should still admit that his anecdotes were

too long, and that his conduct always erred upon the side of caution. I am very fond of Tammy: I was very fond of Papa; but I think it is ridiculous to try to make out that everybody you are fond of is perfect."

"But I think a wife ought to think her husband perfect," argued Esther, who had responded to her mother's training.

The Duchess fairly groaned. "My dear girl, how terribly unmarried you are! You can't help being single (at least you can, though you won't); but this is carrying the thing to excess. There is nothing funnier in life than the ideas single women have about men. I remember one saying to me once that if she had a husband she should like to feel that to her he was like God: but I told her that if she were married she'd soon know the difference!"

"If I had a husband I don't believe I should see his faults." And there was a tender smile in Esther's grey eyes.

The corresponding smile in her sister's eyes was a very merry one. "Then, my dear girl, you'd be a great goose: but you'd be a still greater one if you tried to cure him of them! I always think a husband's faults are like the spots upon the sun. It is a great pity that they are there: but if you try to remove them you'll only succeed in burning your own fingers. And you'll get a lot of amusement out of them if you take them in the right way, and remember that marriage is a voyage of exploration and not a missionary enterprise. I always say that no married woman need go to the theatre if she wants a comedy: there is always one at her own fireside."

"You see, Papa and Mamma fell in love with each other when they were quite young," remarked Esther wistfully, "and they never changed. I think it must

be heavenly to marry the first man you ever fell in love with ! ”

“It may be heavenly, but it certainly isn’t earthly, for it’s a thing that no earthly woman ever does ! ”

“Oh, Eleanor, they do ! Lots of women marry their first loves.”

But the Duchess shook her head. “I beg your pardon, my dear ; not they ! They may think they do, but they don’t. The man you marry is never the man you fell in love with : you can take my word for that. My excellent husband is no more like the Tammy that I fell in love with than he is like the ineligible guardsman or the bulging-eyed curate that I previously fell in love with. Quite a different article, I assure you. When I look at Tammy now, I sometimes almost scream with laughter to remember how at one time I used to think him like King Arthur, with a dash of the *Heir of Redclyffe* thrown in. I did really ! Just as I used to think the curate like Parsifal and Galahad, and the good-looking soldier-boy, that Mamma was so terrified of, a combination of the First Napoleon and Hedley Vicars. And now I’ve forgotten their very names, so they aren’t even names to me : and the Tammy I fell in love with is as much a part of the past as they are, and as unlike his present Grace. You see, the lover and the husband are two separate parts, and can’t be played by the same man at the same time, since the one is old-world romance and the other modern comedy.”

“I’m sure Mamma never thought Papa modern comedy.”

“She wouldn’t put it to herself in those words, but she recognized that his speeches were the opposite of modern comedy, which amounts to the same thing. I openly admit that Tammy’s speeches are dull : she

openly denied that Papa's were : which proves that at bottom she and I are fundamentally one. No girl would either affirm or deny the dulness of her lover's speeches, because the possibility of their being anything short of inspired would never remotely occur to her. But, of course, Mamma wouldn't admit now that Papa's speeches were dull : she has harked back to the inspired stage."

"And I commend her for it," persisted the obstinate Esther ; "I don't think it is nice to talk about people's faults after they are dead."

"There you go again, just like Mamma ! I think you should talk about people who are dead just the same as you do about people who are alive. I can't bear to hear people who are dead always referred to with the prefix 'poor' or 'dear.' I never said 'dear Papa' when he was alive, so I certainly shan't say it now. You'd be very much surprised if I spoke of 'poor Tammy' now : so why should I begin to do so when he becomes—if the Christian religion be true—infinitely better off than he is at present ?"

"I suppose it sounds more respectful," argued Esther feebly. Her sister's flow of words always upset her arguments if they didn't shake her convictions.

"Respectful fiddlesticks !" retorted the Duchess : and then, with one of those flashes of insight into the deeper things of life with which she now and again astonished those who were accustomed to her irresponsible chatter, she went on : "Besides, I hate anything which seems to deepen the line between those who have passed over and those who are still here. If we believe anything at all, we believe that death is a step onward in our spiritual progress as natural as birth or life ; and that those who are what we call dead are really more alive than we are. Then why call

them 'poor' or 'dear'? To do so is simply to give the lie to one of the principal articles of our faith. For my part, I think it is as unchristian to alter your voice and manner when you go into a house where anybody has just died, as it would be to do so when you go into a house where any one has just been born; and I've no patience with it!"

Esther looked thoughtful. "I quite agree that there is something in what you say," she admitted.

"Of course there is; and that something is the truth. If you believe a theory, behave as if you believe it, or else you'll never convince anybody that it is true. And that reminds me that neither birth nor death but marriage is what I am thinking about and attending to at present: for this leg-breaking business of poor Wilfred's (I don't mind saying 'poor' about the unmarried though I do about the dead) shows me more plainly than ever how absolutely necessary it is for him to have a wife to look after him."

Esther's face grew pale with anxiety. "Oh, Eleanor! you don't think he is neglected, do you?"

"Of course I do," replied the diplomatist; "every unmarried man is neglected when he is ill. And Wilfred worse than most, as he hasn't even a mother or a sister to fall back upon. Poor understudies for a wife, I admit; but better than housekeepers or valets."

"I do not think his leg is mending as quickly as it ought," said Esther, with an anxious sigh; "do you think it is?"

"I haven't an idea how long a broken leg takes to mend. I know a broken heart takes about three weeks in town and five in the country; but Mamma never broke my leg in her maternal anxiety to deliver me out of the snare of impecunious suitors, so I've no

data to go upon. But one thing I'm sure about, and that is that a bachelor's leg will never mend as quickly as a married man's, because it isn't so well looked after."

"I sometimes think it might be wise for him to consult a specialist," proceeded Esther, her face still drawn with anxiety on the invalid's account.

But here the Duchess was firm. "Certainly not: I have no opinion of specialists. I divide them into two classes—those that do you no good, and those that do you positive harm. If you want a doctor at all, give me what is called a general practitioner, with no fads and plenty of sense and a cheerful way of looking at things. I can't bear depressing doctors—those with what I call 'a good grave-side manner.' But what Wilfred wants is a wife—not a doctor—and I hope he'll get one before long. After this illness, you must see for yourself how necessary a wife is."

Esther did see for herself: and her seeing eventually bore fruit.

CHAPTER XI

THE WANT SUPPLIED

It was not, however, until the Mershires had migrated to Scotland for the twelfth of August, that Lady Esther allowed the seed planted in her mind by her worldly-wise sister to sprout and blossom into practical politics. It was not until Eleanor was safe off the ground and occupied in making game of her husband's grouse instead of her sister's scruples, that Esther took active measures towards carrying out a plan which she, in the transcendent unselfishness of her soul, had evolved for securing Lord Westerham's permanent happiness and comfort.

"It will be rather quiet for us now that Eleanor has gone away," she remarked to her mother, with a subtlety equal to an unworthier cause; "so I have asked Beryl to come and stay with us for a little visit. It seems ages since she was here."

Lady Westerham walked straight into the trap, as the Duchess never would have done: but it is only our own day and generation that see through us properly. It is comparatively easy to throw dust in the eyes of our near ancestors and our immediate successors; but the eyes that opened contemporaneously with our own, possess—as far as we are concerned—a clearer power of vision. Her ladyship, moreover, was a woman in whom the feeling of kinship ran strong, and any hospitality shown to her own people was always a joy to her.

Beryl Delaney was the only child of Lady Westersham's youngest sister, Adelaide : and Adelaide Henderson—in spite of being the handsomest member of an undeniably handsome family—made the poorest match, and married an Irish officer of unlimited charm and very limited means. Being both the youngest and the beauty of the family, Adelaide was undeniably spoiled, and was accustomed to the unbounded enjoyment of her own way : so that when that way took the form of marriage with the best-looking man she had hitherto come across, she insisted on having it at all costs. That the costs were heavier than one of her pleasure-loving nature could afford to pay, did not enter into her calculations until too late ; and therefore, not long after the birth of her little daughter, she gracefully retired from a world which she had lost for love, but which—after practical experience on the question—she decided had been far from well lost. Major Delaney—having also profited by experimental teaching—chose for his second wife a plain woman who was the eldest, and consequently the least indulged, of a large family, and who made him as happy as Adelaide had made him miserable. The new Mrs. Delaney became at once an excellent stepmother to little Beryl ; and in due time a still more excellent mother to two plain little boys of her own : but—as was perhaps but natural—the predecessor's relatives thought but little of her ; and Beryl imbibed the opinions of her mother's family. To convince the Hendersons of the fact that the reigning Mrs. Delaney was a better mother to Beryl than selfish, beautiful Adelaide could ever have been, was a task beyond mortal powers ; so they always spoke of the child as “poor little Beryl,” and had her to stay with them as much as possible.

It thus came about that Beryl was always, so to speak, on a visit, and nobody was permanently responsible for her training and upbringing; with the inevitable consequence that her education resembled a set of serial magazines rather than a consecutive book—and a set, moreover, of which some of the most important numbers had been mislaid.

She was extraordinarily beautiful—more beautiful than either of her handsome parents had ever been: tall and slim and willowy, with pale-gold hair and sea-green eyes and a complexion like the pink lining of a sea-shell. Her features were practically perfect, and of the Greek type: but for all that, there was something lacking in her beauty—some indefinable want which made it fall short of absolute perfection. It was rather the beauty of a mermaid or a wood-nymph, than of a living, loving woman. There seemed to be no soul inhabiting the sea-green eyes; no heart flushing the shell-pink cheek. Not that there was anything unkind or ill-natured about her: quite the contrary; it was not the presence of evil but the absence of good that was to be deplored in the composition of her character. Her heartlessness was passive rather than active. Her callousness was like the callousness of children and of all very young creatures: it was not unkind, it was merely careless. She said what she thought, quite irrespective of other people's feelings, just as children do; and—as with the unflattering remarks of children—people rather regretted the cause of the speech than resented the criticism of the speaker. If a grown-up person fails to approve of us, we not unnaturally blame that person's taste: but if a child fails to approve of us, we blame our own unworthiness of approbation. And so it was with Beryl Delaney: when she showed—as

she openly did—that she considered anybody old or unattractive, that person did not challenge her judgment with indignation, but accepted it with humility of heart : as would have been the case had Beryl been two years old instead of two-and-twenty.

There are certain people who retain this light-hearted outspokenness of childhood into later life, and as a rule they are very attractive people, but they are also somewhat depressing ones : because the underlying tenderness and simplicity of childhood are no longer theirs. "The primrose of the later year" is not altogether like "to that of spring," whatever the poet may say : and the (so-called) happy souls, whom the passing years leave untouched, may be happy themselves, but they do not bring happiness to those around them. The later year wants something more substantial than primroses : it wants the mellow fruit and the ripened grain and all the glory and the joy of harvest. What is the use of the years, if they pass by leaving us untouched and teaching us nothing ? The apple-blossom of the later year, which now and again is seen, is similar in appearance to that of spring : but it is merely ornamental and bears no fruit. Men do not want apple-blossom in the autumn : they want apples.

Beryl Delaney possessed in no small degree that exuberant youthfulness which is apt to make other people feel old, just as she possessed that type of beauty which is apt to make other people look plain. She could not help it : she was made that way, and it was not her fault that it was a make which contributed considerably more to her own joy than to the joy of others.

She had always been a great favourite with Lady

Westerham and Esther, and had spent much time at Wyvern's End from her earliest childhood. Esther positively adored her. From the time that Beryl was a baby in arms and Esther a girl in the school-room, Esther had been her cousin's devoted slave, asking nothing in return for her abject devotion, as was the way of Esther. Of course when the child grew up she made Esther feel old and plain, as was the way of Beryl; but Esther was so used to feeling old and plain, and had so thoroughly accepted such conditions as the necessary conditions of her life, that Beryl did not depress her as she did most people. Esther, moreover, had that consuming adoration for personal beauty which is characteristic of certain unattractive women.

It is a generally accepted saying that women do not admire each other's good looks; but it is a false saying, nevertheless. It is doubtful if the most susceptible of men feel the same worshipping and enthralling and at the same time impersonal enthusiasm for a beautiful woman as some of her uncompromisingly plain sisters do. ✓

The Duchess had never shared her mother's and sister's devotion to Beryl Delaney. In the first place, though by no means a beauty, she was a much more attractive woman than Esther, and therefore did not share Esther's creed that pretty people could do no wrong: nor, on the other hand, did she share Lady Westerham's creed that blood-relations could do no wrong: and, in the third place, she was a much better judge of character than either of the others, and so Beryl's charms in no way blinded her to Beryl's defects. ?

But though she herself did not succumb to the effect

of those charms, her Grace was far too clever a woman to underrate their possible effect upon other people : and especially upon a young man whose affections had been blighted and whose leg had been broken, and who was now rebounding from the one and recovering from the other.

Esther was clever enough to know that Eleanor would have been clever enough to know this : and that was why she did not invite Beryl to the Dower House until Eleanor was safe in Scotland.

If any one had accused Esther Wyvern of wearing a hair shirt or peas in her shoes, she would have denied the soft impeachment with some asperity as charging her with the practice of what she called Popish customs. But she would have been wrong. No mediæval saint who trod the Pilgrim's Way ever contributed to his own discomfort with more zest than did she to hers. To her mind hair shirts and pea-filled shoes (or their spiritual equivalents) were the only wear. Therefore not only did she shut the door in the face of her own happiness, but she proceeded to lock it and to throw away the key.

So Beryl came to the Dower House to help Esther to help Lord Westerham to while away the dreary time of his convalescence : and she succeeded to the fullest extent of Esther's cruellest hopes.

For Westerham being a man—and, moreover, a man with nothing to do—could not avoid noticing Beryl's idiosyncrasy of making other women look old and plain. That is to say, he noticed the effects of this idiosyncrasy as they affected Esther : and he most particularly noticed the cause of it, which lay in the wonderful freshness and exuberance of Beryl's style of beauty.

Then Esther's pilgrim attire hurt her to the point

of almost unendurable agony : nevertheless, she only drew the hair shirt more tightly round her, and trod the more firmly upon her wounded feet.

Even the most unselfish natures sometimes feel that the sacrifice they are called upon to make is greater than they can bear ; and they are upheld by a vague hope that the whole of their burnt-offering may not be consumed—that the uttermost farthing of their gift may not be accepted—that something will still be left to them out of the general holocaust. And, as a rule, this hope is disappointed : the whole of the sacrifice is consumed upon the altar—the last mite of the gift is dropped into the treasury—and there seems nothing left : nay, not even the gratitude of those for whom the sacrifice has been made. And a thick darkness and a vast loneliness fall upon the souls that seem to have made their great sacrifice in vain. Then let them remember that they are not really alone : for beside them stands One Who likewise prayed—and likewise prayed in vain—that the cup which seemed too bitter even for Him to drink might pass from Him : and thus the cup of suffering—being shared with Him—becomes a sacramental Chalice, and a fore-taste of that Fruit of the Eternal Vine which they shall one day drink with Him new in His Father's kingdom.

Esther Wyvern was called upon to drain to the very dregs the cup of suffering that she had deliberately chosen. Of the wisdom and desirability of this choice there may be two opinions ; but of the absoluteness of the unselfishness that prompted it there can be but one.

There is no getting away from the fact that after Beryl's arrival at the Dower House, Lord Westerham's convalescence became much less irksome to him

than it had been before. Day after day Esther took her cousin up to Wyvern's End to cheer the lonely invalid; and day after day the impression which the girl's fresh young beauty made upon the convalescent became deeper and more lasting. The very exuberance of her vitality attracted him more now that he himself was on the sick-list than it would have done had he been in his usual health and vigour: and the fact that his heart was on the rebound, made it specially susceptible to one who was in every respect the antithesis of his ex-lady-love.

Lady Westerham had dim perceptions as to what was happening: but her Victorian delicacy in dealing with affairs of the heart prevented her from saying a word to her daughter upon the subject. She said—and she thought that she believed—that marriages were made in heaven, and that therefore it wasn't for the daughters (or, rather, the mothers) of men to interfere with these Divine arrangements. Had she been twenty years younger, she probably would have had a try at assisting the Hand of Providence by means of her maternal wisdom: but now she was too old to stray far from the line of least resistance.

It was September by this time, yet Westerham was not mourning the longevity of his partridges as he had expected he should: it seemed enough for him to sit in the sunny garden of Wyvern's End in the short golden afternoons, talking to Esther and her cousin, who was no cousin of his.

Beryl appreciated the beauty and the luxury of the stately old house to the full. Hers was a nature to which physical comfort and well-being always made a strong appeal. And as she basked in the golden Kentish sunshine of an unusually fine September, she made up her mind that she could not select a more

suitable spot for the final pitching of that tent of hers which had already moved too long. She hated, as her mother had hated before her, the poverty of her Irish home : she was bored to death by the flavourless adoration of her father and her stepmother and her ugly little brothers ; she considered that two-and-twenty was a ripe age, and one, moreover, which no attractive spinster should exceed ; and she had gathered from observation of her maternal relations that—though uneasy may be the head that wears a crown—the head that wears a coronet is frequently extremely comfortable.

She did not, of course, know that Esther was in love with Lord Westerham : and it would have made no difference to her if she had. To stand aside in order to secure another person's happiness, was a feat utterly beyond her acrobatic powers. She would as soon have thought of walking upon the palms of her hands instead of upon the soles of her feet, as do anything (to her mind) so foolish. And the possibility that a woman as old and as plain as her cousin could have won the love of a man like Westerham—or, indeed, of any man whatsoever—was one of the things undreamed of in her philosophy. She would as soon have expected him to fall in love with Cleopatra's Needle.

These three were sitting in the sheltered rose-garden of Wyvern's End on one of the still September days, and Esther was expounding to Beryl Wilfred's theory of reincarnation.

"I wonder what I was," asked the girl, raising her heavily fringed eyes to his.

"I know," was Westerham's quick reply : "a mermaid who sat on the rocks, and combed her golden hair, and lured men to destruction."

"Oh, Wilfred, how horrid!" exclaimed Esther, fearing that Beryl would be as much hurt as she would have been at such an implication.

But Beryl was made of other stuff. She was flattered at the idea—as Wilfred had known she would be. "I don't think it's horrid at all; at least, I think it's rather a nice sort of horridness," she said.

"You certainly belonged to the pagan world," continued Wilfred, looking at the girl with undisguised admiration; "and to all the natural, soulless, beautiful things."

"Then perhaps she was a nymph or a dryad," suggested Esther.

"No, she wasn't. She wasn't quite as human as a nymph. She was a cold-hearted sea-maid who sat singing on a rock."

"I'm sorry I was so cruel to the poor sailors," said Beryl.

"But you weren't cruel," said Westerham; "you were only ignorant and unawakened. You sang because you wanted to sing, and you combed your hair because it wanted combing: and it wasn't your fault that the sailors lost their hearts and their bearings, and drifted upon the rocks and were drowned."

"Thank you, Lord Westerham, for explaining me away so nicely. As you say, the silly sailors weren't my business, but my hair and my voice were."

But Esther would not let this pass. "The sailors *were* your business, as it was *your* voice that had led them astray: you ought to have left off singing and have saved them."

"I couldn't possibly have saved a sailing-ship with no tools but one golden comb, unless I had stuck my tail into a hole that the rocks had made, and then I

shouldn't have been a mermaid at all, but a dolphin; and they'd have incorporated me into the arms of the City of Bristol. Now Esther wouldn't have made a good mermaid at all, would she, Lord Westerham? At least I mean she'd have made too good a one. She'd have founded a Seamen's Mission at the top of the rock, with a hospital attached, and would have turned her comb into a clinical thermometer to take the temperatures of the poor dears."

Westerham's eye twinkled. "No, she wouldn't: she would have advised them all to go back home and marry their landladies, provided that the landladies were good cooks; and she'd have explained that a fish's tail was a serious drawback in a good house-keeper, and that it was always a mistake for a mortal to marry one." Which remark showed that it was not only his lordship's leg that was on the mend.

"But you said that I'd once been a nymph," Esther remonstrated; "and a nymph is not so very unlike a mermaid."

"Oh, yes, she is; absolutely unlike. Nymphs weren't cold—they were only shy—and they had every opportunity of gathering sticks and making a good fire upon a man's hearthstone," replied Westerham. "They were frightened of mortals, I admit: but quite tender-hearted underneath the fear. But mermaids were neither frightened nor tender-hearted; they simply didn't care one way or the other."

"Then they *were* cruel," persisted Esther.

Westerham shook his head. "No, they weren't: they were simply ignorant. They had no idea what pain and sorrow were like; therefore they couldn't be expected to have any sympathy with the sick or the sorrowful. You might as well ask a baby to pity its mother's troubles, as ask a mermaid to pity the

drowned sailors. Pain and sadness simply weren't on the map as far as they were concerned."

But Esther still argued. "You say they were only ignorant and unawakened: then why couldn't they be awakened and taught?"

"They could—and sometimes they were. Have you forgotten Hans Andersen's beautiful story of the little sea-maid who gained a soul because she learnt to love the Prince?" Westerham spoke to Esther, but he looked at Beryl, and his eyes, as he looked, were tenderer than he knew.

"Not because she learnt to love the Prince," said Esther softly; "souls are not won as easily as that; but because she learnt to love him better than she loved herself, and to sacrifice her love on the altar of his happiness."

CHAPTER XII

LADY ESTHER'S SUCCESS

LET it not be supposed that Lord Westerham succumbed without a struggle to Beryl Delaney's charms. For a time his loyalty to Esther held him back, and made him feel that the undoubted attraction which Beryl exercised for him was tinged with a shade of something dishonourable. But he was no saint, as Esther was : he was just an ordinary young man, with an ordinary young man's eye for beauty : and what Beryl did not know about the art of attracting men was not worth the knowing. Doubtless it would have been more in keeping with his rôle of devout lover had he kept faithful to his cousin Esther : but, on the other hand, let it be remembered, in extenuation of Lord Westerham's adaptability to circumstances, that Romeo—that accepted prince among lovers—was caught by Juliet's charms when on the rebound from Rosaline.

And what strengthened tenfold Beryl's fascination for Westerham was the fact that she appealed to that side of him which Esther had never touched. She awakened in him feelings which his love for Esther had left dormant, and which consequently had gained strength—when they were at last awakened—by their enforced repose. Had Beryl been eligible to occupy that niche in his heart which Esther filled, he would have steeled himself against her approach, and would

have regarded that very eligibility as an attack upon Esther's stronghold. But to object to one woman's playing in the pleasure-garden because another woman is praying in the oratory, seems an absurd precaution against any infringement of the law of trespass: there appears no possibility of the one's interfering with the other, as their centres of action are so far apart: and therefore it happened that Esther's throne was already tottering before Westerham had any idea that Beryl was within half a mile of the throne-room.

Being a man, he talked to Beryl about the things nearest to his heart, as he had talked to Esther: and being a man he had no idea that Beryl did not understand one tithe of what he was saying and would not have been in the least interested even if she had understood. She listened to his words so prettily that none but a cynic—and hardly a male cynic at that—would have imagined that all the time she was planning in her head the elegant costumes that she would wear when she was Countess of Westerham.

"You must have been awfully pleased when you found you had come into all this," she said to him, waving her hand to indicate the vastness of his possessions.

"I was for some things—but not altogether for others."

Although Beryl was incapable of feeling interest in other people's affairs, she was by no means incapable of experiencing curiosity, and she was faintly curious now. "What sort of things made you not pleased, Lord Westerham?"

"Well, of course I was dreadfully sorry about Captain Wyvern's death—which really killed his father."

"I don't see that there was any need for you to be sorry about that : you didn't know him."

Westerham smiled. Unconsciously to himself, he found Beryl's childish irresponsibility a pleasant change after Esther's incessant splitting of hairs. "I didn't say there was any need for my sorrow : I only said I felt it."

"Well, I think it is a great mistake to be sorry about anything that doesn't affect you at all, and especially when it affects you pleasantly, as this did," argued the Hibernian beauty. "But that's only one thing ; and you said *things*. I want to know the other things that made you not so pleased as you ought to have been to become Lord Westerham."

"Well, then, another thing was that I didn't like giving up my profession."

"But why? You weren't a soldier," said Beryl, to whom there was only one profession, and that not one of the so-called "learned" ones.

"I was a journalist," replied Westerham proudly ; "a profession which I hold inferior to none."

Beryl raised her finely pencilled eyebrows. "Not to soldiers?"

"Certainly not," replied Westerham, who, in spite of his broken leg, could still mount his hobby-horse, and—when once mounted—could retain an unshaken seat. "Take the professions one by one, and tell me which of them is greater than Journalism? I admit to the full the grandeur of the Army and the Navy as the defenders of our country ; but I maintain that 'prevention is better than cure' ; and that while soldiers and sailors can only take their part in a war when it comes, the Press can prevent or precipitate that war in the first instance. The Services may conduct it to a successful issue, but not before there has

been a terrible sacrifice of life and money; but the Press—if only it will use its influence in the right direction—may often avert war altogether.”

“I see,” said Beryl. But what she really saw by that “inward eye which is the bliss of solitude” was a *Princesse* gown of green velvet, which would show up her golden hair and her sea-green eyes to perfection. Whenever Westerham began to talk about anything but herself, she at once turned the current of her thoughts towards the unceasingly interesting subject of dress.

But, of course, Wilfred knew nothing of this: “Take the learned professions,” he went on: “a barrister argues a question before a judge and jury; but a journalist argues it before the whole of the British Public. A doctor cures his own particular patients; but a journalist—through the medium of his paper—can preach the laws of hygiene to hundreds of thousands, and can show up, and so bring to destruction, evils which are a menace to the public health.”

“Of course he can,” were the words of Beryl’s mouth; but the thoughts of her heart ran thus: “I think a hat to match would be better than a black one: a big green velvet picture-hat, with a long ostrich feather.”

“Then take schoolmasters: they only educate comparatively few compared to those whom the Press educates; and the Press goes on educating even those few after the schoolmasters have done with them.”

“Yes,” said Beryl doubtfully. She was wondering whether one long ostrich feather or a bunch of shorter ones would look best.

“Of course,” continued Westerham, “one cannot choose one’s lot, and one has to try to do one’s duty

in the state of life to which one is called : but all the same—if I had been given my choice—I'm not at all sure that I wouldn't have chosen to be a member of the Press rather than of the Peerage. I mean the best part of me would have so chosen : the worst part of me naturally enjoys the flesh-pots of Egypt more than the manna of the wilderness. But candidly I believe that I could have done more good to my fellow-creatures, and wielded a far wider and more beneficial influence, if I had remained a journalist."

Beryl's lovely eyes expressed whole volumes of sympathetic interest as she communed with herself : "I think one long natural-coloured ostrich feather would really look better than anything—better even than keeping the hat all green."

Encouraged by the apparent sympathy shining in the beautiful eyes, Westerham went gaily on : "I cannot tell you what a glorious feeling of power it gives one to sit in an office and know that from there one is forming public opinion, and pulling strings which will sway the destiny of nations. The enormous power of the Press is, of course, quite a modern growth, and men do not yet rightly gauge it : if they did, I think they would add a word to the Litany, and pray that not only the "nobility" and "the lords of the council," but the Press also might be endued with "grace, wisdom and understanding."

Westerham was almost startled by the look of supreme satisfaction and absolute content which suddenly flooded the beautiful face at his side, apparently at his suggestion of an amended Litany : he felt that even Esther herself could not have responded more quickly and more subtly to the workings of his mind. He had no idea that the sunshine which illumined Beryl's fair countenance was caused—not by any

feeble words of his—but by a final decision that a pure white ostrich plume would be the really *chic* finish to the green velvet picture-hat.

And so it went on. Day after day Westerham succumbed more and more to Beryl's fascinations. Had she been a plain, or even only a passably pretty, girl, he would have seen through her as clearly as anybody : but—being a man—her marvellous beauty absolutely dazzled him, and prevented him from being so clear-sighted as he would otherwise have been.

Esther—who had deliberately brought this state of things to pass— marvelled at him. She was quite as ready as he was to forgive Beryl's shallowness for the sake of Beryl's beauty ; but what astonished her was that Westerham failed to perceive there was any shallowness to forgive. There the fundamental difference of sex came in. Some women are quite as ready as men to excuse the shortcomings of their beautiful sisters ; but it is only men who cannot see that there are any shortcomings to excuse.

So gradually Westerham fell into the trap that Esther—in the blindness and unselfishness of her heart—had set for him : his feeling for Esther slowly congealed into friendship, and his admiration for Beryl into love.

What Esther suffered at this time no one knew but herself. With bleeding feet she firmly trod the stony path that she had marked out, and with unfaltering courage she took her broken heart in her hands and laid it on the altar of Wilfred's happiness.

And she reaped the full agony of her reward : for there was no doubt that Westerham was really happy in his love for Beryl Delaney.

His love for Esther, though deep, had been calm and still ; but his passion for Beryl intoxicated him and

turned his head. Although with regard to what is called book-learning Beryl was absolutely ignorant and Esther distinctly far advanced, in knowledge of men and the ways of managing them Esther was a child compared with Beryl. After Wilfred had fallen in love with her, Esther could do nothing but love him in return; but Beryl was mistress of a thousand arts whereby to charm his fancy and stimulate his passion.

And at last Wilfred even went to the length of admitting to himself that Esther had been right all along, and he had been wrong. For, in addition to the fine breeding and finished manners which Beryl shared with her cousin, she possessed an exuberance of youth and beauty which that cousin—even in her youngest days—had never known.

Lady Westerham regretted the turn which affairs had taken, but felt powerless to alter it: her days for understudying Providence, with regard to the love-affairs of her daughter, were long over and past, and as she had no longer the strength and energy to amend what she considered the Divine decrees, she gracefully submitted to them; and turned her attention to her garden, where she could count on reaping what she had sown with far more certainty than she could in dealing with that more debatable soil, the hearts of her children.

By the time that the Duke and Duchess came back from Scotland, the engagement of Beryl and Lord Westerham was announced; so that there was nothing left for her Grace to do towards the prevention of Lady Esther's self-inflicted martyrdom; for that martyrdom was already accomplished, and the future Lady Westerham's trousseau ordered.

"It's no use crying over spilt milk," the Duchess

remarked, the first time she motored over to the Dower House after her return; and so she straightway sat down beside her mother, and proceeded to cry over it.

"I could do nothing, absolutely nothing, Eleanor," pleaded the Countess; "Esther would have Beryl to stay here, and the rest seemed to follow of itself."

"Of course it would, with Beryl being so absurdly pretty!"

"Perhaps it was a mistake for Esther to invite her just then; but it never occurred to me that there was any danger in it. I am so used to the dear child's beauty that I have ceased to notice or to think about it; and I was so busy arranging a new rose-garden at the other side of the big lawn that I am afraid I did not give much thought to the matter; but when Esther made the suggestion I just acquiesced. I fear my pleasure in my garden is making me selfish and indifferent to my children's interests." And Lady Westerham's still beautiful eyes filled with tears of remorse.

"Oh no, Mamma, it wasn't your fault at all, and you are not an atom selfish, and couldn't be if you tried. And besides, Esther's inviting Beryl wasn't a mistake at all: it was a deep-laid plan."

"A deep-laid plan, my dear? I do not quite understand."

"It was a contrivance of Esther's to make herself as wretched as she possibly could—and more so. She had made up her mind not to marry Wilfred, just because she wanted to: and then I rubbed it into her, when he was laid up, how much he wanted a wife. I thought I was being very clever and succeeding in inducing Esther to marry him after all, by showing her that it was her duty to do so. But that is always the way. When you think you are being particularly

clever you are generally engaged in doing the most stupid thing you have hitherto done in the course of your whole life!" And the Duchess groaned in spirit.

Her mother laid a soothing hand upon her shoulder. "Do not say that, my love. You are never stupid."

"Not often: only on the few occasions when I think I am being particularly clever. If only I hadn't so rubbed it in about Westerham needing a wife, Esther might have been content to let him remain single. But after I showed her that he really wanted one, she at once set about providing him with the article, and killed two birds with one stone by making Westerham happy and herself miserable at the same time. I never knew such a glutton for misery as Esther is!" The Duchess was one of those people whose deep and real sympathy with the trouble and infirmities of those whom they love, expresses itself in irritation against the sufferers.

"Still, my love," argued her mother, "Esther had the chance of marrying Wilfred and refused him of her own free will. She is certainly old enough to please herself; and I agree with you that probably no one but herself is to blame. We cannot legislate for grown-up people as we do for little children. All that we can do is to exercise for their good such influence as we have over them."

"And that is none at all! I've come to the conclusion that nobody ever really influences anybody, after anybody is over eight years old."

"Oh! Eleanor, I cannot agree with that," remonstrated Lady Westerham, who belonged to the "word in season" generation, and had unlimited faith in the converting powers of what she called "personal influence."

"But it's true, Mamma, all the same. I don't believe a woman ever influences anybody except her husband and children; and not even her husband after she is married to him, or her children after they are grown up."

"My dear child, it grieves me to hear you say such things!"

"I can't help that. It's the truth, and you've always brought us up to speak the truth. Of course, when I was young I thought I was going to carve my name upon everybody I met, as if they had been beech-trees, and leave indelible and heavenward-pointing footsteps on the sands of time to guide all that came after me. But experience has taught me what a goose I was. The only people I've ever really influenced in my life were the men who were in love with me, and the children when they were little: and that wore off after the man married either me or somebody else, and the boys went to school."

Lady Westerham shook her head in strong disapproval of these sentiments. "You still have great influence over your husband, my love."

"Oh! dear no, I haven't. If I ask Tammy to do something just to please me, he'll always do it: but if I try to prove to him that he ought to do it because it is right or the wise thing to do, he'll go a hundred miles in the other direction after pointing out at length that the thing itself is neither right nor wise. I don't call that 'influencing' him. I can always get my own way, I admit, by asking for it as a favour: but I can never get it by trying to show that it is the right way; that sets his back up at once."

"But, my dear, I am sure that Tammy is as anxious to do what is right as you are."

"Of course he is—much more anxious: only he

won't stand being taught what is right by his wife. All men are the same. The moment a wife becomes a signpost to heaven she is as worthless to her husband as if she had become a pillar of salt. He has no use for her : so he just goes on his way and leaves her behind, as Lot did."

Lady Westerham looked both shocked and perplexed. "My love, these are newfangled views, and I do not understand them. They distress me."

The Duchess laughed. "They needn't distress you, Mamma : they are really rather grateful and comforting ; because they relieve one of that awful load of responsibility for other people, which makes life such a burden. I assure you it was quite a relief to my mind when I discovered that it was out of my power to make other people either bad or good. All we can do is to make them happy or unhappy : I admit we have plenty of influence on the happiness or the comfort of our fellow-creatures, if not on their characters. And if we try to make everybody with whom we are brought into contact more cheerful and more comfortable than they would have been had we never been born, I don't think we shall go far wrong."

"Perhaps you are right, my dear, and my old-fashioned views on the importance of personal influence, and of our responsibilities towards one another, are somewhat out of date."

"Of course they are, Mamma : and anyway they have signally failed in the present instance ; for I said every word in season that I knew—and out of season, too—to induce Esther to accept Westerham ; and they only resulted in inclining her not only to refuse him, but also to stick up Beryl as a buffer between them, to prevent his ever proposing to her again !"

At the mention of Beryl, the gloom on Lady Wester-

ham's brow lightened to some extent: her ladyship was one of the women who in spirit always dwell among their own people. "Well, Eleanor, if Esther is determined not to marry Wilfred—though I confess it is a great disappointment to me that she is so determined—there is no one whom I would sooner see as mistress of Wyvern's End than dear Beryl. I was always greatly attached to your poor Aunt Adelaide: and next to one of my own daughters I feel there is no one who will take my place better than her daughter will. And it is also a vast relief to my mind to know that Beryl will be so well provided for: for your Uncle Patrick is a most extravagant as well as a most unbusinesslike man, as dear Adelaide found to her cost." It was against the traditions of the house of Henderson to own that any of its members could be at fault. According to its dicta, it was always the "in-laws" that were to blame. No Henderson was capable of understanding that the extravagant member of the Delaney *ménage* was not "Uncle Patrick," but "poor Adelaide" herself.

CHAPTER XIII

TAMFORD CASTLE

THE interval between the beginning of Beryl's engagement and the conclusion of it satisfied even Esther's almost insatiable appetite for misery. Day by day and week by week her tender heart was well-nigh wounded to death by the sight of Lord Westersham's infatuation for her cousin: and it really was an infatuation that possessed him—quite different from the deep and calm devotion which he had so lately experienced for Esther herself.

Although Esther had planned this engagement in her own mind, and worked for it with her own hands, she was a little surprised that Wilfred had fallen into her trap so easily. It was inconceivable to her that a love which was as obviously strong and sincere as Wilfred's had been for her, should so speedily prove itself transferable. She did not know men as did her sister, or as did the woman in Browning's poem, *Any Wife to any Husband*. She judged the opposite sex by her own: which is a fatal thing for any woman to do. She did not make the mistake—which many women similarly circumstanced would have made—of imagining that because Wilfred's love had been transferred so easily it had not been real love at all. The school of love had already taught her more than that. But she did make a mistake in thinking that it had been transferred at all. She did not understand that Wilfred had not taken away from her the thing which

she had refused, and had given it to Beryl; but that the thing which he had given to Beryl had never been hers—never could have been hers—at all.

It is perhaps impossible for any woman to understand with her heart, even though she may know it with her brain, that the love of a man is divisible—is separated into water-tight compartments, as it were—and so may be shared by two women at once—and yet be real and sincere in both cases. In a woman's love there are no water-tight compartments; she gives the whole of her heart at once, even though she may speedily take it back again; and to her it is impossible to be on with the new love before she is off with the old. It is an axiom that if she is in love with B, she can no longer be in love with A: one state of affairs precludes the other. It does not follow—be she made of slight elements—that she will not be in love with A again, as with C and D and E in turn; but she cannot be in love with any two of them at once: her heart is only licensed by Nature to carry one passenger at a time. But though it is true that there can never be two kings in Brentford, it by no means follows that there cannot be two queens. There can be, and—unfortunately for feminine peace of mind—there often are. And this is what no woman can thoroughly comprehend, nor consequently thoroughly pardon. It is incomprehensible to her that a man may love two different women at once, with two different sides of his nature, and without any conscious disloyalty to either of them.

The admiration that Beryl inspired in Westerham was totally different from anything that he had ever felt for Esther. It was too intense for happiness—too violent for comfort. In her presence he was so intoxicated by her beauty that he hardly knew what

he was doing : and in her absence he was so full of thoughts of her that he was equally irresponsible. For the time being she had completely turned his head.

While on the one hand Westerham's obvious infatuation was almost more than Esther could endure, on the other hand it brought her a strange species of comfort ; for it proved to her that her immolation of herself had been no sacrifice of fools, but rather a thing which was intrinsically lawful and right ; it showed her that she had been correct in her idea that youth should mate with youth, and that anything else was against the laws of Nature. Therefore she hugged her cross in the belief that it had saved Wilfred from a lifelong mistake : she pressed the thorns gladly into her own bosom, because they had enabled her to sprinkle Wilfred's path with flowers. The ineffable joy of the martyr pierced through the overwhelming misery of the woman ; and the more intense her anguish at the sight of Wilfred's bliss, the more ecstatic was her delight at having been permitted to give it to him. As the mediæval nun, whom Wilfred said she had once been, kissed the scourge by which she lacerated her own flesh, so the Esther of to-day embraced the sword by which she had pierced her own soul : and this led her to augment her torture by inviting the bride-elect to stay at the Dower House during the time of her short engagement. Lady Westerham was only too pleased to acquiesce in this arrangement, as—like all typical mid-Victorian matrons—she delighted in the conventional fuss which is considered the proper prelude to an entry into the holy estate of matrimony.

As for the Duchess, she washed her hands of the whole affair, and accompanied her lord and master

to Tamford Castle for the hunting season. She had long ago acquired the two invaluable habits of submitting to the inevitable and of following the line of least resistance. Esther had made her bed and Esther must lie on it, and nothing that the Duchess now could do or say could prevent that bed—which might have been a bed of roses—from being instead a bed of thorns. Therefore the Duchess did and said nothing whatsoever.

But the Duchess's elder son was not so supine. He was much about the same age as Beryl, and the two had been brought up together almost like brother and sister. In the days when the house of Henderson was shielding poor Adelaide's motherless child from the tender mercies of her excellent, middle-class step-mother, the motherless child and the little Marquis of Tamford used to spend weeks and months together at the latter's various homes and at Wyvern's End. As the Duke's two sons had no sister, Beryl filled the vacant place, and the young Oldcastles treated her to the good comradeship and the unvarnished candour which they would have meted out to a sister of their own.

Therefore as soon as he heard of Beryl's engagement to Wilfred, Lord Tamford—who was on leave at Tamford Castle for some hunting—induced his mother to invite the lovers for a little visit, in order that he might sample the gentleman, and retail the results of this examination to the lady. There was no jealousy in his heart regarding the engagement: he was far too much of a brother for that; but he felt slightly annoyed with Beryl for having presumed to take so decisive a step without first consulting him; just as he would have felt annoyed with her a dozen years ago if she had bought a terrier or a guinea-

pig without first consulting him. Tamford had never really grown up any more than Beryl had: they both looked at life from very much the same standpoint as that from which they had regarded it ten years ago. Their experiences had naturally increased with the years, but not their powers of assimilating those experiences. Their happenings were the happenings of a man and a woman; but their outlook upon those happenings was the outlook of little children. Tamford would no more have hesitated to give Beryl his candid opinion of her future husband than he would have hesitated in the old days to give her his candid opinion of a new governess; and Beryl, on the other hand, was as ready to discuss Lord Westerham with Tamford as she used to be to discuss her dancing or her drawing masters.

Therefore, in accordance with the decrees of the young Marquis, Westerham and Beryl came together to Tamford Castle at the beginning of December.

This was Wilfred's first visit to the Duke's midland home, and he was impressed—as are all travellers who pass through the Black Country for the first time—with the marvellous and Inferno-like effects of that strange land as seen by night. To Beryl it was merely smoky and dirty, and the sooner she passed through it to the beautiful Mercian country on the other side the better she was pleased. But to Wilfred's more artistic eye there was a weird beauty in the sight of the blazing chimneys, with their clouds of smoke and their showers of sparks, standing out against the murky sky; and a strange fascination in the vision of the magnificently-built, half-naked Titans, whose huge arms manipulated the molten iron in the lurid glow of the great blast-furnaces.

And as Westerham gazed at the strange scene, he

felt that this wonderful land of iron was as beautiful in its way as the wooded hills and the hop-clad valleys of Kent. As the rustic beauty of the garden of England was typical of the rest and peace and repose which are found in the heart of Nature, so this wild country of coalfields and furnaces was typical of the vital force and energy which are found in the heart of Man. The one was the shrine of Rest; the other the shrine of Work: and who shall say that the one shrine is higher or holier than the other? True, the Gospel of Rest has comforted and sustained the toil-worn sons of men all along the two thousand weary years, since the promise "Ye shall find rest for your souls" was uttered. But the Gospel of Rest is not the last Word of the Divine Message, though it is the Word that helps us and comforts us in the days of our flesh. The Gospel of Rest is for the worn and weary: the Gospel of Work is for those that excel in strength: and in the great Apocalypse, which dimly foreshadows the glory that is yet to be, when this earth and its burdens shall have been burnt up as a scroll and no place found for them, we find no further Gospel of Rest: but we read of glorified beings who rest not day or night saying "Holy, holy, holy"; and of a City whereof the gates are never shut, for there is no night there.

"Yes; the final Gospel is the Gospel of Work, not the Gospel of Rest; just as the morning, not the night, is the completion of the day. But the sons of men have got out of their reckonings, and imagine that youth will be swallowed up in age, and morning will be blotted out by night, and death will be the end of life. This is only the language of earth: this is but the measure of a man. When God reckons time, He puts it all the other way. With Him, age

will be swallowed up in youth, work will follow after rest, life will be the end of death; and so the evening and the morning will be the first day of eternity.

While the sight of the Black Country brought its message to the heart of Lord Westerham, it brought nothing at all to the heart of his future wife. She simply hated it. It had frightened her as a child and it bored her as a woman; and if it had not been for the state and luxury of Tamford Castle on the other side, she would never have crossed the Mershire coal-fields again. But Tamford Castle, and all that it stood for, meant a great deal in the life of Beryl Delaney.

As yet, however, Westerham was far too much in love with Beryl to be conscious of her limitations: so he endeavoured to convey to her—as he would have conveyed to Esther—some of the thoughts which his first sight of the Black Country awoke in his mind. And because she had acquired the art of listening graciously, even when she did not take the trouble to hear, he imagined that Beryl understood his ideas as Esther would have understood them. Such is the folly of a man!

It is true that when Beryl first appeared upon the scene Wilfred had recognized her as a mermaid with an unawakened soul; but that was before he was blinded by his love for her. He had still sufficient sanity left to remember his mermaid theory; but he believed that the sleeping soul was gradually awakening at his touch. As has been said before, there was a strong feminine vein in Westerham's mental constitution; and his love for and companionship with Esther strengthened that vein. But while his love for Esther stimulated the feminine side of his character,

his love for Beryl, on the contrary, stimulated only the masculine side: so that he was much less subtle, and much less discriminating in his judgment of women, since he fell in love with Beryl than he was before. Any woman—let alone the woman with whom he was infatuated—could have taken him in far more easily now than she could have done then: and Beryl took him in completely.

From the glare of the Black Country the train passed into the beautiful, moonlit scenery of the rural district lying to the north-west of the great coalfields: and then Westerham turned from the window of the railway-carriage, and took Beryl in his arms. Though love in the true sense of the word was a closed book to Miss Delaney, she understood the outward and visible signs of it considerably better than she understood conversations upon abstract and metaphysical subjects. When her lover talked about Work with a capital W, she was completely at sea; but when he kissed her, and told her how pretty she was, she felt, so to speak, her native rock once more beneath her fish's tail; and she again took up the siren's song which was wiling his very soul out of him.

"My darling," Westerham whispered, "how beautiful you look in those furs!"

Beryl responded to his caress with more warmth than she would have displayed had he mentioned anything less dear to her than her dress. "I am so glad you like them," she replied, nestling up to him. "Esther and I chose them at the International Fur Company's the other day. They really are Aunt Cecilia's wedding-present to me; but she thought I might as well wear them just for this visit, as people are always so smart at the Castle."

Westerham laid his cheek against the dark sable,

which set off to such perfection the exquisite complexion that he loved.

"They are lovely," he said; "but not so lovely as the face above them." And Beryl was so pleased at his flattery that she gave him kiss for kiss, and strengthened him in his vain belief that the spirit within her was awakening, and that his little sea-maid was becoming a mortal woman and acquiring an immortal soul.

The lovers received a cheery welcome when they arrived at Tamford Castle; and what with her new furs and her satisfied ambitions, Beryl looked more beautiful than she had ever looked before. Lord Tamford described her to himself as "positively rippin'"; the Duke inwardly commended Westerham's choice and Esther's wisdom; and Wilfred was almost off his head with pride and happiness. But the Duchess saw otherwise. She was the last person to have her judgments set on one side by anything so skin-deep as physical beauty, and she was very fond of her sister: so she was greatly irritated with Beryl for looking so lovely, and with the men for so obviously noticing it.

There was not a large house-party—only a couple of Lord Tamford's brother-officers, and an odd girl or two thrown in to play with them—as the Duchess was far too angry with the lovers to have what she called a flourish of trumpets to announce their engagement and to render them homage under her roof. She had bidden them to the Castle because Tamford's wishes were law to her; but she marked her displeasure by inviting them to meet the poorest and smallest house-party that she could muster during the hunting season.

"I am furious with Westerham for falling in love with that tiresome little Beryl," she remarked to her

husband; "although it really isn't his fault that Esther refused him; just as Papa was furious with him for being the next heir, though it wasn't his fault that Uncle William and Algy died before Papa, either."

"I cannot altogether blame his taste in selecting Beryl," was the Duke's mild rejoinder.

The Duchess shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, that's simply because she is good-looking."

"Precisely so: that was my sole reason for commending Westerham's choice; and it is a good enough reason, too."

"Good enough for a man!" And there was a world of scorn in the Duchess's voice.

"Exactly: I never pretended to be anything else. Had I been, I should never have had the happiness of marrying you."

The evening passed off merrily enough in spite of the meagreness of the house-party. On this occasion her Grace's punishment fell flat. There were romps in the billiard-room, and hide-and-seek in the drawing-room, and pillow-fights on the grand staircase, before the entertainment came finally to a close; for the guests were young and in the highest of spirits. Beryl led the fun, as she generally did on such occasions; and her exuberant vitality and irresponsible gaiety made her contemporaries feel younger than usual, and her elders very old indeed. The Duchess was conscious of this, and remarked to her lord when the fun was at its height: "When Beryl is like this she always makes me feel so dreadfully old: I shall soon want railings round me, and leaden plasters all over me, as ancient trees have. Just tell me when you think my ivy wants clipping, or the mosses and lichen want scraping off my roof: otherwise my amiable expression will soon be as indecipherable as

the inscription on an old tombstone; and it will be very expensive to have it carved again!"

After a pause, which was filled with shouts of youthful mirth, her Grace rambled on: "On second thoughts I feel it would be best for you to dismiss my maid, and put me under the care of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments. They'll keep me in repair, and prevent the public from carving their names on me, far better than Smallwood could. She is excellent at hairdressing and dressmaking; but she really knows nothing about repointing ancient walls or restoring ruined buildings."

Half an hour later the Duchess came once more to her husband's side: "I'm past preserving, Tammy: there is nothing for it but excavation, like Herculaneum and Pompeii and the buried cities of Mexico. Keep anything you fancy, and send the rest to the British Museum."

But the Duke only gurgled and patted his wife's shoulder. He had heard her on Beryl Delaney before.

The next day a southerly wind and a cloudy sky proclaimed it a hunting morning, and Beryl came down to breakfast in her riding habit, ready equipped for the day's sport. Westerham's leg was still rather stiff, and the doctors had advised him not to begin riding again until after Christmas: so he was looking forward to a day of Beryl's unalloyed society, while Tamford and the other young people were off after the hounds. Wilfred was far too much in love to enjoy mixed company: the roystering merriment of last night had bored him almost as much as it had bored the Duchess, and he longed to get Tamford and his friends out of the way, and his darling to himself.

Therefore it was with a pang of both wounded affec-

tion and acute disappointment that he saw Beryl come down to her breakfast ready dressed for hunting.

He had no opportunity of speaking to her privately during the meal, although he sat next to her: the Duchess's second-rate house-party was young and happy enough to be boisterous even at breakfast, just as it was not yet old or weary enough to prefer that repast in its own respective rooms. But when the meal was over, he drew Beryl into the deep recess of one of the big bay-windows, and began: "I didn't know you meant to hunt while you were here, my darling: you never told me."

The sea-green eyes opened wide in surprise. "Why should I tell you? I thought you knew. What do you think people pay visits in December for except for the hunting?"

"I thought we came here so as to be together."

"To be together? What a funny idea! We were together at Wyvern. I thought we came here for a little change."

"Then didn't you know that the doctors won't let me hunt yet?" Westerham could not keep the pain he was suffering from sounding in his voice, but Beryl did not notice it.

The lovely green eyes looked more mystified than ever. "Of course I knew. You've talked of nothing else for the last fortnight! But I don't see what that has got to do with it." This was distinctly unjust: Westerham had talked very little about the effects of his accident, and had hardly grumbled at all: but Beryl was one of those people who shrink from everything and everybody connected with physical sickness and suffering, and who feel neither sympathy nor pity for bodily infirmities, but only irritation mingled with contempt.

"I thought perhaps you would stay at home with me, and let us have a long and happy day together."

"Oh, Westerham, what a ridiculous idea! And when Jocko has offered me such a splendid mount, too! Besides, we can only run after foxes in the winter, and you can run after me all the year round: so it would be against the laws of political economy to turn a hunting day (of which there are only a limited number) into a love-making day (of which there is an unending supply)."

"Very well, my darling, I hope you will enjoy yourself."

Beryl neither heard the regret in her lover's voice, nor would have heeded it if she had. "I am sure I shall: Jocko and I mean to lead the field. We used to do it last winter, and we mean to do it now."

Westerham's face was suddenly clouded over with anxiety. "My sweetheart, do take care of yourself, and don't be reckless. I shall be miserable with anxiety until I see you safe home again!"

"Now, Westerham, don't turn into a maiden aunt before your time: I couldn't stand it. I've no use for a maiden aunt—especially as a husband. If it is wrong for a man to marry his grandmother, I'm sure it is equally wrong for a woman to marry her maiden aunt; and that seems what I am going to do if you don't struggle against the tendency."

"Come, Berry, it's time to be off," shouted a fresh young voice; and Lord Tamford—looking the ideal, handsome, healthy, wholesome young Englishman that he was—in his pink coat and white breeches—bounced into the recess, and interrupted the lovers' *tête-à-tête* with no scruples whatsoever. "The motors are at the door, and I don't want to be late at the meet

as your little mare hates waiting about. Come on, there's a good girl!"

"Keep your hair on, I'm coming!" replied Miss Delaney, gathering her habit together, and rushing after the good-looking young soldier, leaving her lover and his remonstrances to take care of themselves.

About an hour later the Duchess spied this same disconsolate lover walking alone up and down the terrace, and trying in vain to solace his desolation with a cigar. Her Grace was in her husband's sanctum, whither he had called her in order to consult her about some improvements which the agent had suggested in a model village on the estate; and in order to discuss which the Duke had given up his day's hunting.

"Look at that idiot mooning about by himself and fretting after Beryl!" exclaimed the Duchess.

The Duke looked. "Prythee why so pale, fond lover?" he quoted.

The Duchess replied for the gentleman in question. "He is pale because the doctors won't let him take his game leg out riding yet, and Beryl has ridden to hounds without him. He'd have liked her to stay at home and moon about with him, and stroke his poorly leg."

"Delightful for him, but perhaps rather dull for Beryl!"

"If he expects Beryl to be tied by the leg—by his leg, I mean—as Esther would have been in the same circumstances, he'll soon find out his mistake," remarked the Duchess.

"Apparently he has found it out, and doesn't find the discovery exhilarating."

"Well, the sooner he gets used to it the better: Beryl will always be horrid to him when he is ill; and he had better make up his mind to that at once. It

is no good marrying a professional beauty and expecting her to make a good sick-nurse. You might just as well buy a diamond tiara and expect it to turn into a flannel petticoat ! ”

“Then you do not think our uncertain and coy little Beryl will make-up well for the part of the ministering angel ? ” said the Duke.

The Duchess shrugged her shoulders. “Not she—

‘When pain and anguish ring the bell,
The angel will not be *chez elle*.’ ”

The Duke gurgled with marital appreciation of his wife’s sally, then he said : “Well, just now, I wish you would come and look at the plans of these so-called artistic and picturesque cottages, and leave Westerham to bear the consequences of his own mistake, which I, by the way, do not consider a mistake at all, saving your presence.”

The Duchess shook her forefinger at him. “Oh ! Tammy, how can you say that when you know he ought to have married Esther ? ”

“Well, he tried to, didn’t he, and failed ? So now he is bearing the consequences of Esther’s mistake, which—if you will allow me to say so—I do not consider a mistake either.”

The Duchess groaned. “Oh, Tammy, you are the most brutal husband ! ”

“On the contrary, I am the most just brother-in-law : and now that I’ve met Westerham and Beryl together, and seen how tremendously in love with her he is, I more than ever commend Esther’s wisdom in refusing him. I wouldn’t for worlds say anything against Esther, and you know how greatly attached to her I am ; but you must see for yourself, Nell, that

Beryl is a far more suitable wife for him than Esther could ever have been."

"I see nothing of the kind," retorted her Grace.

"Because you put the telescope to your blind eye when poor Beryl's good points are under discussion," replied the Duke.

"No, I don't. I haven't got a blind eye where Beryl is concerned: I leave that to you men."

"All right; even with our blind eyes we cannot go far wrong when we have such wives as you to keep us straight. And now do come and attend to these plans, or else the architect will be here, and I shall not know what to say to him."

And so the Duchess turned her attention from Lord Westerham to the cottages, and gave her husband—as was her custom—sound and sensible advice.

As far as the hunting-party was concerned, the day was a great success.

The meet was at Gunston Hall, a fine old Tudor manor-house, about five miles from the Castle; and when the ducal party arrived upon the ground they found an unusually large field already assembled. Beryl had always loved hunting; and as soon as she had sprung out of the motor, thrown off the fur-lined coat which covered her riding-habit, and been mounted on to the skittish little chestnut mare which Tamford had lent her for the occasion, she felt the excitement of the chase stirring in her pulses and sparkling in her eyes. Beryl Delaney was as keen in her physical perceptions as she was dull in her spiritual ones: the beauty of a landscape never appealed to her; the ecstasy of swift movement in the open air went to her head like wine. Surely all of us have experienced from time to time that exquisite sensation of physical well-being, which makes of health not merely a

passive absence of disease, but a source of active joy and gladness : when we long to run with outstretched arms to meet the wind which is blowing over the moorlands, or to steep our senses in the warmth of the sunshine which is flooding the meadows with gold. To most people—after once their childhood is over—this feeling comes only occasionally ; but to Beryl it came very often indeed ; and it came to her with unusual force as she capered about on the skittish little mare, and looked at the gay scene around her.

It really was an inspiring and exhilarating sight, and also a typically English one. The morning was one of those mild winter ones, which are as beautiful in their way as the days of summer, with their marvellous effects of light and colour. The exquisite tracery of the leafless trees stood out against a soft grey sky broken by gleams of pale yellow sunshine ; and the evergreens were green with that intense greenness which we never see except in what is called “a green winter.” Behind the beautiful rose-colour of the old manor-house stretched the long low hills of the Midlands : those hills which are so low and so friendly that they appear rather as gates than as barriers between us and the fairyland that lies beyond them. And in front of the manor-house there was collected that gay and motley crowd which we never see anywhere save at an English meet of hounds—that merry, cheerful gathering of riders and walkers, and pink coats and black coats, and men and horses, and carriages and motors, with the quivering tails of the pack of hounds twinkling merrily in their midst.

Beryl was a splendid horsewoman, and she and the chestnut mare were soon on excellent terms with one another. As Lord Tamford rode beside them he was bound to admit—even judging them with the candour

of a brother—that they made an exquisitely pretty pair.

Then they were off, Tamford, as usual, riding close behind the M.F.H., with Beryl at his side. The Master decided first to draw a spinney quite near to the manor-house, and there—to Beryl's great delight—they found. She never could bear a cover to be drawn blank, it seemed such a terrible waste of time; but luck was with the hunt this morning. The fox made for the stretch of open country lying in the opposite direction from the hills or the river, so that there was nothing to check his course or to spoil the scent: and then ensued one of the best runs of the season—a run of full fifty minutes before they killed in a field on the borders of Cannock Chase. Tamford and Beryl led the field, to the latter's great delight. The little chestnut took her fences like a bird, Tamford giving her a lead on his black hunter; and Beryl could have shouted for joy as they skimmed through the bracing midland air across open stretches of country.

"Firefly is in good trim to-day," remarked Tamford, as they stood at ease, watching the baying, rolling, roystering hounds demolishing the poor old fox.

Beryl patted the mare's neck. "She is a perfect darling, Tamford. Where did you get her?"

"I bought her from Silverhampton. Lady S. used to ride her till she began to put on weight; but when milady touched eleven stone, the little mare wasn't big enough for the place. So Silverhampton sold her to me."

"I think she is a perfect treasure. The way she takes her fences is a dream."

"I'll tell you what, Berry : I'll give her to you as a wedding present, if you like."

Beryl's eyes sparkled with delight. "Oh, Tamford ! you are an angel—a perfect angel ! I should simply adore to have her !"

"Then you shall : that's settled. She is really a lady's horse, and hardly up to my weight."

The joys of the day were not yet ended. They found again not long after the kill, and had another splendid run of three-quarters of an hour, this time in the direction of Tamford Castle. So that it was a very happy pair of young people who ambled home together along the lanes in the fading light of the short afternoon.

After they had talked over the day's sport, Lord Tamford remarked : "By the way, Berry, I'm glad to have sampled Westerham. I don't think you ought to have got engaged to him without askin' my opinion first ; but all the same, I can't help ownin' that on the whole I think you might have done worse. He's really not half bad !"

It would never have occurred to Beryl to resent her cousin's patronizing manner. It was the way in which he had always dealt with her since their nursery days. "I'm awfully glad to hear you say that, Jocko : for my part, I think he's a bit stodgy and heavy in hand ; but if you don't think he's bad, then I shan't mind him so much."

Tamford took this speech in the spirit in which it was uttered. It seemed to him most fitting that the future Lady Westerham should submit to his lordly judgment in this way. "Oh ! he's stodgy enough, I don't deny that. But there are worse things in the world than stodge."

Beryl sighed. "Stodge is all very well in its way, but it'll be a bit dull to be married to, don't you think, Jocko?" Lord Tamford was always called Jocko, because he had been christened George.

"Not at all, Beryl. Don't be fussy! It is in a husband that stodge is at its best. *Home Influence* and *Family Prayers*, and all that sort of thing on the stage, don't you know?—and no larkin' about in the slips in the intervals."

Beryl was greatly encouraged by this cheerful view of things. Tamford's opinions had always carried enormous weight with her. "I'm really fond of him in a way," she admitted; "and, as you say, there is a sort of restfulness in having really good people at the back of you."

The mentor still cheered without inebriating. "I don't mean to say that he's the sort that'll set the Thames on fire, or win the Derby or anythin' of that kind: slow and steady's the word. But he's a good sort, Mother says so, and it isn't easy to deceive her Goodness Graciousness." Her "Goodness Graciousness" was the Duchess's pet name in her family circle.

"He talks an awful lot," said Beryl, "and I haven't a notion what it is all about. But I say 'Yes,' and then count ten; and then say 'Yes' again and count ten; and then say 'Yes' again and count ten; and that seems to pan out quite well and to please him."

"Oh, that's all right! I shouldn't bother about that if I were you. Husbands and wives never listen when they talk to each other, only when the other is talkin' to somebody else. And Mother likes his talk: she told me so; she says it makes her feel like Sunday afternoons at Stoneham Abbey." If Tamford was

Beryl's final Court of Appeal, his mother was Tamford's.

Beryl nodded her pretty head. "It is rather Sunday afternoon-ish : makes one sleepy, don't you know?"

"And you'll have a rippin' time at Wyvern's End : it's a regular top-hole place. I was tremendously pleased when I heard you were goin' there for good. It'll be just the thing for you, and we'll have A1 times together when you get there."

"Yes, I adore the idea of living at Wyvern's End. And I'm sure that Wilfred will make a thoroughly kind husband, even if he is a little dull. You can't have everything!"

"Of course you can't," replied Tamford in his most elderly-brother manner; "and to tell you the truth, Berry, I think that what with bein' so good-lookin' and always havin' your own way, you're gettin' a bit top-heavy, don't you know?—expectin' to get more juice out of an orange than there is in it. The fact is, you don't see as much of Archie and me as you used to, and it's tellin' on you."

Beryl laughed good-humouredly. "Good for you, Jocko! You and Archie always keep me humble."

"Humble! Not much! Not takin' any to-day, thank you! No, my dear girl, we can't keep you humble : that's too big a job even for Archie and me. But we do keep you less top-heavy than you would be without our refinin' influence."

Beryl went calmly on as if her cousin had never spoken. "And it's a great relief to my mind that you don't think Westerham's so bad after all. I do hope Archie will like him too."

"Archie will like who I tell him to like. I don't stand any nonsense from Master Archie! And I'll tell you what, Berry : Westerham's the sort that'll

keep up the habits of Wyvern's End properly. He's a bit like the old boy used to be; and it's a rattlin' good sort, I can tell you, though apt to be a bit heavy on the chest at times." Though the Marquis did not honour his departed grandfather in the letter, he most certainly did in the spirit. "I say," he went on, "shall you ever forget the Sundays at Wyvern's End when we were kids—how the dear old boy used to jaw at us about the Bible and things of that kind from mornin' till night? And Foreign Missions—do you remember him when he got his second wind over Foreign Missions, and ran them for all he was worth? He was great then—he was simply immense!"

And the two young people continued their mutual reminiscences of still more youthful days until they turned into the great gates of the Castle, and cantered their tired horses gently across the park.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

THE WEDDING

It was on the sixteenth of December that Lord Westerham and Beryl Delaney were made man and wife. The knot was tied by the Bishop of Merchester, assisted by the Vicar of the parish; and a very nicely-worded homily was delivered by his lordship in place of the somewhat hackneyed expositions of Saints Peter and Paul, felicitating the happy couple on the excellent judgment each had displayed in selecting the other for a life-partner, and gently hinting at the advisability of cultivating mutual adaptability, and a certain amount of give-and-take, as calculated to smooth the waters of married life, which—like those of the Pool of Bethesda—are occasionally troubled by an angel.

Beryl in her heart of hearts cordially agreed with the Bishop; but in her private, if unexpressed, interpretation of his lordship's words, Westerham was to do all the giving, while she would have no difficulty in carrying out the rest of the episcopal injunction.

Lady Esther, who assisted at the ceremony with a joy at seeing the happiness of Wilfred that almost brought peace to her aching heart, thought within herself how gladly she would have spent herself and

been spent in giving full measure, pressed down and running over, of her love, and asking but little in return.

But the Duchess, experienced in the ways of husbands, nodded her head in august approval; and, lest her lord's attention should be wandering—as not infrequently was the case in church—she called upon him to pay due heed to the Bishop's words of wisdom by several of those ear-splitting whispers which are described in the language of the stage as “asides.” “A life-like snap-shot of me!” she murmured, as the Bishop concluded his discourse by a paraphrase of the ideal wife portrayed in the Book of Proverbs.

Mr. Perkins, who viewed the proceedings with stately dignity from a back pew, whence he could conveniently retire, while the register was being signed, in order to welcome the happy pair on their arrival at the Dower House, was slightly shocked at the implied suggestion that there could be even a ripple upon the sunlit ocean of the matrimonial life of a British earl. Mrs. Brown, the housekeeper, on the contrary, with a keen remembrance of her own adventures on the uncertain sea of matrimony, was equally shocked at the misleading idea that there could even be an occasional calm in those troubled waters: but she loyally held her peace until the wedding-day was over. She felt it was not for her to throw doubt upon the present wisdom and future happiness of “the quality.”

It was a pretty wedding, as it could not fail to be in such a picturesque old church and with such a beautiful bride: if “The Voice that breathed o'er Eden” breathed slightly out of tune, the choir made up for lack of ear by superfluity of lung, and took such excellent care of the sentiments of the occasion that

the sounds were not unnaturally left to take care of themselves.

In due time the register was signed; Beryl had been kissed by divers privileged relations; the Bishop had offered his ecclesiastical congratulations; the Vicar had followed suit; the younger members of the wedding-party had adorned the occasion with stereotyped jokes, and the elders with stereotyped tears, according to their respective days and generations; and at last the Earl and his Countess drove off amid the cheers of the men and the curtseys of the maidens.

A lady in her bridal finery is not very easy of access; but if Wilfred could not reach Beryl's lips, he covered her hand with kisses as soon as the carriage had left behind the crowd at the lych gates. He was consumed with pride and happiness.

"My beautiful wife!" he murmured passionately, as he kissed again and again the small gloved hand.

Beryl, too, was in a state of blissful content. A Countess, with diamonds and dresses galore, halls and parks, carriages and horses, to say nothing of a husband who adored her, and for whom she cherished as much affection as she was capable of cherishing for anybody, she did well to be happy. But there was a difference: Wilfred was happy because he thought of his wife—Beryl, because she thought of herself.

In due time the reception—the inspection of the numerous wedding-presents, where each guest made for his or her own gift like a sleuth-hound, in order to see where it had been placed—the cutting of the cake—and all the other items of the wedding ritual were over, and Westerham and Beryl had fairly started on their honeymoon. With the courage and the vanity of youth, which does not believe that even cold winds can wither or sea-sickness stale its infinite

variety, they had decided to go abroad, heedless of the fact that a bad crossing (and it was December), with its attendant ills and disfigurements, might strain almost to breaking-point their mutual affection. But fortunately both were good sailors, and Paris was reached without untoward happenings.

Beryl had never been out of England before, but Paris had become well known to Westerham in his journalistic days. To his astonishment Beryl seemed to care little for pictures, or churches, or fine services. The glories, architectural and musical, of Notre-Dame, the Madeleine, and St. Eustache were of no account to her; the opera indeed she tolerated, but she paid but scant attention to the music, the toilettes of the women and the glances of admiration from the men absorbing all her interest. She went to see and to be seen. She was frankly bored by the treasures of the Louvre, the Luxembourg and the Hôtel de Cluny: but she never tired of the milliners', the dressmakers' and the jewellers' shops. In these she exhibited a pretty taste; and despite her new trousseau, and the gems she had received as wedding presents, she contrived to spend no inconsiderable sum in supplementing the contents of her wardrobe and her jewel-case.

From Paris they went on to Italy: but Beryl showed no more admiration for the glories of Milan and Venice than for those of Paris. Westerham tried to persuade himself that he was not disappointed, and in a measure he succeeded. What was Beryl's lack of artistic appreciation compared with Beryl's matchless beauty? Westerham was tasting for the first time earthly bliss. To have Beryl always with him; to feast his eyes on her perfect face; to stroke her golden hair; to anticipate her every wish; to be startled over and over again with the wonderful thought that these

were no transitory joys, that she was his for life—these filled him with a rapture that had little place for criticism. So Westerham was happy—happier than he had ever deemed it possible to be, after Esther had refused him. Nor was he alone in his bliss: Beryl, too, was happy. If she did not understand Wilfred or comprehend the depth of his devotion, she liked him immensely. Apart from her enjoyment of the luxury of rank and fine dresses, she could not but feel his tenderness and his thoughtful kindness. So she, too, enjoyed herself in her own way.

Meanwhile Esther was being fed with the bread of affliction and the water of affliction. Altruism is all very well; but while the practisers thereof ought to wrap themselves in the mantle of their virtue and find satisfaction and peace in the contemplation of a good deed well done, as a matter of fact they rarely do anything of the sort. Lady Esther's pampered conscience might impel her to rise to a wonderful height of self-abnegation in her passionate desire to secure the happiness of the man she adored, but it could not prevent her from feeling the wonderful height extremely bleak and desolate; it might likewise induce her to give away half of her cloak, according to the fashion of S. Martin, but it could not hinder her from catching a chill when bereft of fifty per cent. of the protecting garment. That is the way of pampered consciences: they create the demand, but have no intention of providing the supply.

But Esther had one great compensation in the midst of her anguish: there was no drop of bitterness mingled with her cup of sorrow. She possessed one of those rare natures that are free from any taint of jealousy: the fact that Beryl was now enjoying the bliss that she herself had renounced, in no way dimin-

ished her love for the girl. She also possessed a gift equally rare in a woman—a strong sense of justice; and this enabled her to realize that it was by her own act that Westerham's love had been transferred from herself to Beryl, and that therefore Beryl was in no way to blame—was not even guilty of a shadow of disloyalty towards her cousin. Esther did not belong to that by no means inconsiderable army of martyrs who sacrifice themselves to another, and then spend the rest of their days in punishing that other for having accepted the sacrifice.

But though the Christmas bells brought their gospel of peace and goodwill to the soul of Lady Esther, they brought no message of joy: and the sadness of her heart imprinted its image and superscription on her already prematurely lined brow.

These signs were not lost upon the Duchess, who had all the maternal instincts of a typical elder sister; and they caused her much tribulation and anxious questionings as to what she should do to cheer up Esther.

"I tell you what, Tammy," she remarked to her husband, "Esther has made a terrible mistake. She threw Beryl at Westerham's head, and, of course, as she wouldn't have him, he's gone and married her, and now she's miserable." And the Duchess shook her head more in sorrow than in anger.

The Duke looked up with an amused smile. "That sentence of yours, my love, is not particularly intelligible. How do you know that Beryl is miserable? Has she been writing to confide in you? It seems early days as yet even for a woman to wax eloquent over her matrimonial wrongs. I know that later in the day there is no subject of conversation so innocently delightful to the feminine mind as a husband's lapses

and limitations: but it appears slightly premature upon a honeymoon."

"Don't be a goose, Tammy," replied her Grace impatiently; "you know as well as I do that it's Esther who is miserable. I wish her conscience had been sent to Jericho!"

"Why treat so valuable an asset as an export?" asked the Duke.

"Because a first-class conscience, when in good working order, is frightfully troublesome and expensive. I'd sooner keep a white elephant or a pack of foxhounds myself: unless, of course, it was one of those performing consciences, which are thoroughly broken in and trained to stand on their hind legs and to do parlour tricks, and whatever else you tell them. Those are very convenient sorts of things to have, I admit."

"Very: because then they draw the carriage, while you guide them from behind with the reins."

"Of course, you do," the Duchess rattled on; "and yet you've all the prestige of keeping a conscience—like somebody in some old-fashioned trial who was considered a gentleman because he kept a gig, don't you know? But it must be broken in to harness."

"Yes; that is the sort of conscience that you would like," said the Duke.

"It is the sort of conscience that I've got, I'm thankful to say. I couldn't endure one that shied at everything it sees, as Esther's does: it would make me quite nervous to ride behind it; I don't much like riding behind a shying horse, but I simply daren't ride behind a shying conscience: and it would never do for the daughter of a hundred earls—or, to be quite accurate, of four—to show the white feather, and be afraid to take her own conscience out for exercise.

And then, if it didn't get any exercise, it would put on weight, and be more burdensome than ever!"

"My love," remarked the Duke, "you sometimes say things which make me regret that I married you, and so for ever resigned the right of taking you down to dinner."

The smile, which was never very far from her Grace's eyes came back into them. "Allow me to tender your Grace a hearty vote of thanks for the kind way in which your Grace has referred to my conversational abilities. But it's no good making fun, Tammy; things are most frightfully serious. Esther is miserable because she hasn't married Westerham; and Mamma is miserable because Esther is miserable; and I am miserable because Mamma and Esther are miserable! And if that isn't bad enough, Westerham is coming home next week and bringing that tiresome little Beryl with him; and then everybody will be ten times more miserable than they were before: and to make matters still worse, my new gown from Paris is an utter failure, and Smallwood doesn't think it can ever be made fit to be seen! Troubles never come singly."

"No: generally matrimonially I have observed," agreed the Duke.

"And what'll be done when the Westerhams do come back, poking themselves into places where they are not wanted (even if it does happen to be their own home) goodness only knows, for I'm sure I don't!"

At this point the Duchess, who really was very unhappy about her sister, found it quite necessary to be petted and comforted: so her husband petted and comforted her to her great content.

The next week the happy pair returned to their ancestral hall, to quote from the local paper, which

excelled itself in several descriptive columns devoted to what it called "this auspicious occasion." The welcome at the station, the triumphal arches, the addresses from tenants and local authorities and the replies thereto, gave the enterprising reporter an opportunity to which he did full justice: and Westerham (as an old journalist) relished to the full the flowery productions of his erstwhile fellow-worker.

The welcomings, the festivities and the speeches were a new experience for both bride and bridegroom; but while Beryl enjoyed herself immensely, Westerham found the whole thing rather a bore. He was pleased, no doubt, with the friendliness and expressions of goodwill on the part of the neighbouring gentry and the tenants; but he was not particularly fond of making speeches—that was a taste to be acquired subsequently; still, he said what had to be said with propriety and with an evident sense of satisfaction at the efforts to do him honour: so that his speeches, if short, were acceptable, and he made a good impression.

It was always distasteful to Westerham to say the obvious thing: and on occasions such as these the obvious thing is the only thing to be said. Subtlety of expression—and, still more, subtlety of thought—are caviare to an agricultural audience. Therefore Wilfred descended to the commonplace and obvious, despising himself all the while for this necessary descent. But as he looked at the enterprising reporter, who was busy stringing together the pearls and diamonds which were falling from his lordship's lips, a great wave of home-sickness for the old journalistic days swept over Wilfred's soul. People who have ever "done things" always find it somewhat insipid to change an active intellectual life for a passive one;

just as people who have once lived in London always find it slightly dull to settle down in the country: and—now that the novelty of being a belted earl was over—the bygone joys of being a budding editor shone brightly by contrast. It might be a great honour to be a peer; but it was far greater fun to be a penman. His honeymoon, however, had taught him that Beryl would regard such sentiments on his part as rank lunacy: so he carefully refrained from expressing them. There was only one person who would have understood them, and that was Esther; but he was as yet too well satisfied with his wife's face to expect her to have a head as well—let alone a heart.

The world of women is divided into three classes—those who have heads, those who have faces, and those who have hearts: which doctrine was taught us early by our childhood's well-known forfeit, "Kneel to the wittiest, bow to the prettiest, and kiss the one you love best." The wise man makes up his mind which—in his opinion—is the most important organ, and marries it; and it is rank folly to expect either of the others to be thrown in. If they are, all the better for everybody concerned! But as a rule they are not: for though the superior sex may find it possible on occasions to be "three gentlemen at once," a feminine Cerberus is a very rare bird indeed.

As her sister had surmised, Lady Esther dreaded with unspeakable dread the return of Lord and Lady Westerham to Wyvern's End: and—as is generally the way with the things that we overpoweringly dread—the reality did not prove anything like so terrible as the anticipation. Much as she loved Beryl—unselfishly as she adored Wilfred—Esther had felt that the sight of their mutual happiness would be more

than she could bear; but when the time came, she found that she could bear it very well indeed.

It is only the sorrows which are tainted with sin that seem more than we can endure, and whereof the realization is more terrible than the anticipation. It was the punishment of Cain that seemed greater than he could bear. And though, perhaps, Lady Esther's sacrifice had been a counsel of perfection—though she had gone out of her way to immolate her happiness upon an altar of her own raising—the altar was raised to no Unknown God, and the burnt offering was pure and without blemish. Perchance she misjudged the God of her fathers when she imagined that He called upon her to give up everything that she held dear—to put away untasted the cup of human happiness, and to pour it on the ground before the Lord: but she did not misjudge Him when she believed that He values not the gift upon the altar, but the love which sanctifies the gift; and that even a cup of cold water given in His Name shall in no wise lose its reward. And the reward came to her not in any rejection of her sacrifice, nor in any substitution of some other form of human happiness in place of the one which she had voluntarily rejected, but in that Ineffable Power Which transfigures death into life eternal, and pain into that peace which passeth all understanding, and Which those who have tasted it know to be none other than the Grace of God.

CHAPTER II

MERSHIRE HOUSE

It was the height of the season, and the Duchess was giving one of her big receptions. Mershire House was *en fête*, and had assumed its most palatial aspect for the occasion. The decorations were crimson roses to match the crimson carpets of the hall, staircase and corridors; and they were to be found everywhere. Great banks of crimson roses filled up all the fire-places, and every available corner as well: the lower part of the staircase was lined with crimson roses growing in pots; while in the hall, on either side, was a perfect jungle of exotic trees, which overhung the staircase with their drooping branches. All the gold plate was spread out on the buffet in the large drawing-room, and each of the state drawing-rooms was transformed into a bower of roses. It was more like a scene out of a fairy-tale than an event in everyday life; and the countless silk-stockinged footmen, hurrying around with their red-plush breeches and their powdered heads, added to the Cinderella-like appearance of the entertainment.

The celebrated staircase at Mershire House was a professional beauty among staircases—the sort of staircase whose photographs appear in *The Connoisseur* and similar artistic periodicals. It was very broad, and very shallow, and ascended from the middle of the central hall; but when it had gone half-way to

the next floor it divided into two tributaries, which turned round respectively to the right hand and to the left, and finally lost themselves in the gallery above, which commanded the doors of the state drawing-rooms.

At the point where the great staircase divided into its two tributaries, the Duchess—backed by a huge mirror and surrounded by banks of crimson roses—stood to receive her guests, looking her very best in a black gown covered with sequins, and enriched by the full blaze of the celebrated Mershire diamonds. Beside her stood the Duke, his usual ponderousness of appearance relieved by a genial smile and the star and ribbon of the Garter. His Grace was an ideal host; and had the happy knack of making all his guests feel that they—in his opinion, at least—were the guests of the evening.

Up the great staircase came a continual stream of the best-dressed and the best-looking people in London; while the excellent band in the hall below discoursed sweet music, and added to the fairy-like effect of the occasion. Some of the guests dispersed themselves through the suite of drawing-rooms leading out of the great gallery; but the larger number remained in the gallery itself to watch the advent of the crowd which continually poured up the grand staircase.

And even among that assembly of beautiful and beautifully-dressed people there was a momentary hush of admiration as Lord Westerham and his bride ascended the stairs to the rose-covered island where the Duke and Duchess stood: for Beryl's loveliness was a thing that seemed almost too perfect to be real. She was all in white, with a superb diamond necklace and tiara; and her beauty, thus seen, was of

that compelling sort which makes a man hold his breath at the wonder of it.

Even the Duke, who had known her all her life, was momentarily taken aback by the splendour of her loveliness, though he was far too wise a husband to make any remark upon the subject to his Duchess; her Grace—in spite of her habit of putting the telescope to her blind eye when Beryl's good points were concerned—could not help seeing how fair the new Lady Westerham was: while Esther—who was watching from the gallery the arrival of the guests, and looking rather pale and washed-out in grey satin and her mother's pearls—felt a throb of selfless joy in the thought of how her own sacrifice of herself had brought the glory and the pride of life to Wilfred. He looked radiantly proud and happy as he walked up the grand staircase by his exquisite bride and saw the admiration and homage which she commanded at every step; and Esther knew—and was brave enough not to shrink from the knowledge—that all her love and devotion and adoration could never have brought that same look of pride and happiness into his eyes that Beryl's beauty had brought. And recognizing in this look her own handiwork in having given Wilfred and Beryl to each other, Esther saw the work of her hands and thought that it was very good.

But Wilfred's friendship was still hers; that she knew, and rejoiced in the knowledge: and it was not long before he left Beryl surrounded by her numerous throng of admirers, and found his way to Esther's side.

As Esther looked up to him in greeting, she saw that there was still a smile in his deep-set eyes; but it was quite a different smile from the one that Beryl had conjured up, and Esther was quick to note the

difference. The look of enthralling happiness and of triumphant pride had been replaced by an expression of calm affection and deep content.

"Beryl is looking very lovely to-night," she began; "I never saw her look so well."

"Yes, isn't she? That dress suits her to perfection. And I always think that a diamond tiara gives a woman a fairy-princess sort of look; don't you?"

"The modern ones do, but not the old ones. I never think there is anything at all fairy-like about Eleanor in the Mershire diamonds," replied Esther, with a smile.

"Not fairy-like exactly; but—what shall I say?—very great-ladyish and distinguished."

"I always told you that Eleanor could be *très grande dame*, if she liked."

"And I always agreed with you, but laid special emphasis on the option. Now you and your mother cannot help being *très grandes dames*, whether you like it or not: it's part of yourselves."

"Eleanor always says that when she puts on the Mershire diamonds she feels the respected shades of her ancestors-in-law closing around her," said Esther, still smiling; "and that with a diamond fender on her head and a diamond poultice on her chest a woman can face anything."

"How like her! And it is quite a good description of the Mershire diamonds, too. They have all the solidity and heavy respectability of the mid-Victorian period."

"I know, and I like them for it. They are a type of that age, just as Beryl's fairy-like jewellery is a type of to-day. Things are more beautiful than they used to be, and much more artistic; but I somehow miss the absolute solid comfort of the past generation."

Westerham shook his head. "I don't agree with you."

"I knew you wouldn't; but, you see, I was brought up in it, and you weren't, and that makes all the difference."

"I think," said Lord Westerham, "that the past generation made the great mistake of confusing comfort with happiness. They thought the two were the same, while they are really fundamentally different. In true happiness there is always a flavour of adventure, while comfort and adventure are at opposite poles."

"I believe you are right," replied Esther; "now you mention it, the word 'comfort' certainly played a large part in the conversation of our parents and our uncles and our aunts. Mamma even now talks of a 'comfortable settling' when she wishes to describe an ideal marriage."

"She would: all her generation would. Now the present generation appreciates luxury, I admit: but I don't think it cares very much about mere comfort. The spirit of adventure is abroad again—that spirit which hibernated through the mid-Victorian era; and therefore I think great things are about to happen—great, splendid, uncomfortable things, which our parents and grandparents would have disapproved of with all their hearts."

It was characteristic of Westerham that he could talk in this abstract way in the midst of a gay and crowded company; and it was equally characteristic of Esther that she could listen to him. Such a conversation at such a time would have bored Beryl to death, besides seeming to her as rank lunacy; but there was a certain detachment about both Esther and Wilfred—a certain aloofness from their surroundings—which

was as incomprehensible to Beryl as it was to the Duchess, but which was one of the cords which served to draw Esther and Wilfred together. To both of them, in their different ways, it was easy to be in the world yet not of it: like all other human beings they had their limitations, but worldliness could never be one of them.

Their conversation was interrupted by a stir and bustle as the Duke and Duchess left the landing-stage upon the staircase, and went down through the crowd, which quickly divided to make way for them, to the hall below, and so on to the front door, to welcome—with deep bow and curtsy—their Royal guests. Then there came that sudden hush which always precedes the advent of Royalty; and then the band struck up the National Anthem as the host and hostess, with their Royal guests, ascended the grand staircase and passed through the suite of drawing-rooms, while the crowd which lined it bowed low at their approach, as a wheatfield bends before the breeze. It was a slow procession, as there were many distinguished people present with whom Royalty stopped to speak and shake hands, thereby conferring a pleasure to which even the most *blasés* are not indifferent, and from which the most democratic are not immune.

After the Royalties had passed, Esther said to Lord Westerham, "I know it may seem to you very ridiculous, but I never see Royalty without feeling a lump in my throat, and wanting to cry."

"It doesn't seem ridiculous to me at all," he replied; "as a matter of fact, I have exactly the same sort of thrill myself—a sort of electric bell-ringing all down my spine."

Esther looked at him with grateful appreciation. "How nice of you to feel it too! I am so glad that

you do. And other things give that feeling, as well as Royalty. Weddings, for instance."

"Yes: and the colours of a regiment, and soldiers on the march, and a fire-engine at full speed. All these things give me what I call the Royal thrill."

"They do," replied Esther; "they all make me want to cry, but it is a happy sort of crying—not at all a sad sort. I wonder what the reason is."

"I think I can tell you," replied Westerham, as they strolled into one of the drawing-rooms and sat down on a settee. Now that the Royalties had arrived, the crowd at the top of the staircase broke up, and filled the drawing-rooms with a blaze of beauty and a babble of conversation, excepting the inner drawing-room at the end of the suite, where the Duke and Duchess entertained their Royal guests and a few other chosen friends; and where there was felt that severe absence of crowding and that subdued tone of conversation which are always a sign of the presence of Royalty, and which mean something infinitely more than the mere good manners of well-bred people in the presence of their Sovereign. These things are outward and visible signs of that spirit of reverence which—in spite of modern efforts to disguise or destroy it—still lies at the root of all forms of government and of all forms of religion, and without which mankind can neither rule themselves nor serve their Maker.

"Now tell me why kings and princes and weddings and fire-engines make you have electric bells down your back and me have tears in my eyes," said Esther.

"They have this effect not because of what they are, but of what they represent," replied Westerham, as usual oblivious of his surroundings, and absorbed in an endeavour to express aright the meditations of his heart, and to receive in return the result of the medita-

tions of his fellows. "They thrill us because they are the signs and symbols of the greatest things in the world; and in perceiving the sign, our hearts instinctively do homage to the thing it represents. When we feel thrills at the sight of a Sovereign and at the sound of the National Anthem, it is not the King as a man nor the tune as an air that stirs our blood: it is the King as an embodied symbol of Authority, and the tune as an audible sign of Patriotism, that fill us with delicious thrills and tears. For the moment we are face to face with Abstract Authority and ear to ear with Abstract Patriotism, and so deep calleth unto deep; and the deep in our own souls responds to the call."

"And I suppose a wedding stirs in us the same way because it is the outward symbol of Love and Marriage," said Esther.

"Precisely: and as the colours of a regiment are the symbol of Victory, and a fire-engine at full speed is the symbol of Succour and Salvation. It is the spirit which informs all these things that thrills us; not the things themselves."

Esther's face suddenly grew very tender. "Christmas thrills me too," she said; "to me it is the symbol of the spirit of Childhood. A Christmas not spent with children seems to me no Christmas at all. It is not so much the individual child that matters, as the fundamental type underlying the separate unit. At Christmas every child becomes for the time being the embodied spirit of Childhood."

"And more than that," added Westerham softly, "it becomes the symbol of the spirit of Childhood embodied and manifested in the Divine: and so the symbol becomes a sacrament."

That smile on Esther's face was so radiant that for

the moment she was almost beautiful : and Westerham, as he looked at her, thought with a sigh what an ideal of motherhood had been lost in this withered old maid. She had succeeded in convincing him that her youth was indeed over ; but that did not prevent him, in the midst of his own happiness, from mourning over her wasted youth.

He felt very tender towards her at that minute. He had become so used to his wife's exuberant vitality that Esther, by contrast, looked to him older and more faded than she had ever looked before. But this did not estrange him from her as it would have estranged most men : it only strengthened her appeal to that feminine part of his character which Beryl, in the very nature of things, had never touched. But if he was half woman in his sympathy with Esther, he was all man in his way of showing it : he asked her to come downstairs to the supper-room and have something to eat and drink, because she was looking tired.

Beryl, in the meantime, was enjoying herself immensely with Lord Tamford. She had made a triumphal procession with him through the suite of crowded rooms, battenning her vanity upon the obvious sensation which her beauty created even in an assembly where beauty was by no means rare : and now they were having supper together at a little table for two.

"I'll tell you what, Berry," said the young mentor, as he filled her glass with champagne : "you've done awfully well for yourself in marryin' old Westerham. He's regular top-hole ; and the more I see of him the better I like him."

The new Countess nodded her tiara. "Yes, Jocko, he really isn't half bad. He doesn't bore me any-

thing like as much as I expected, and he is most tremendously kind."

"Bit head-in-the-clouds, don't you know? and all that sort of thing," added the Marquis loftily; "but there are worse places for a man's head than in the clouds—much worse places. As you say, he's rather heavy on the chest at times—when he spreads himself on Art and Religion and intellectual things like that, don't you know?—but he's got a lot of sense hidden underneath all his high-flown palaver."

"Yes, he has plenty of sense," agreed the bride. "I consider him quite a reasonable being, taking him all round."

"Then I say you are a lucky young thing; for most husbands aren't reasonable bein's at all—at least, not the husbands of good-lookin' girls like you. They are jealous and fussy, and get all sorts of rotten ideas into their silly heads, till their wives have no fun at all. But good old Wilfred isn't built on those lines; he lets his wife have a good time; gives the poor beast her head goin' uphill, and never puts the break on, or spoils sport out of sheer cussedness. I call old Wilfred a sportsman, and I consider you've done well for yourself, Berry."

"Yes," replied Beryl, "I'm thoroughly contented."

"And you do buy rippin' clothes now you're married and have good old Wilfred's purse to pull at," continued the appraising cousin. "You always knew how to dress yourself—I will say that for you—when you could let yourself go. But that wasn't often. But now——! Well, the fashion-plates aren't in it: that's all I can say. I'd be seen anywhere with you, Berry—that I would—and feel blood-is-thicker-than-water and hands-across-the-sea and for-the-sake-of-auld-lang-syne, don't you know, all the time!"

"I'm glad you feel proud of me, Jocko," said Beryl simply. She spoke without a shade of irony : the one aim of the childhood of herself and Lord Archibald had been to earn Tamford's praise ; and the habit and ideas of childhood die hard.

"Well, I do ; proud and pleased, as they say in speeches. And if I'd had a sister I'd have been jolly well satisfied with her if she'd been cut after the same pattern. I can tell you it is a credit to any fellow to be seen about with a young fashion-plate like you. I'm sure when you see the sort of relations that some fellows have, you wonder that the fellows don't go straight and drown themselves ! Awful freaks that look as if they'd served their turns as scarecrows, and then started the business on their own, don't you know ?"

Beryl laughed sympathetically. "I know the sort. Aren't they dreadful ?"

"Simply terrifyin' ! And I'll tell you what, Berry"—here Lord Tamford leaned across the table and became very confidential—"if Aunt Esther don't take care, she'll get involved in the scarecrow business ; she's beginnin' to look as if she'd got shares in the concern already. I've noticed it for some time. I hinted it to Mother, but you know she never will hear a word against Aunt Esther, and she nearly bit my head off. But the thing must be seen into, or else she'll qualify for a Home for Incurables, and be past mendin'."

It may seem strange that while Beryl freely discussed her husband with Tamford, she slightly resented it when he laid critical hands upon her cousin Esther ; but this again was only another instance of the longevity of childish habits of mind. As a child, Beryl had adored Esther ; and—as far as she was now

capable of adoring anything except her beautiful self—she adored her now. "I am very fond of Cousin Esther," she said rather stiffly.

"So am I; I'm devoted to the old girl, and have been ever since I was a kid. And that's why I don't like to see her makin' a Guy Fawkes of herself as she's got into the habit of doin'. Couldn't you give her a hint?"

Beryl shook her head. "I'm not sure that I could. Although Cousin Esther is so sweet and gentle, there's something rather stately underneath that you can't take liberties with, if you know what I mean."

Lord Tamford nodded. "Rather! Always got the queen up her sleeve, don't you know?—and may play her at any minute."

Beryl laughed. She understood Tamford's jokes so much better than Westerham's theories. "And then," she added, "you see Cousin Esther is quite old; and I dare say when you get really old you begin not to care so much about dress."

"But Mother is older than Aunt Esther," he argued: "five years older, and you never see her that she isn't dressed up to the nines. If the end of the world came to-morrow, you'd fine her Goodness Graciousness in a suitable toilette for the occasion, you bet! None of your young scarecrow costumes for my mother, if you please: not much!"

"But she's married—and a duchess—and all that, don't you see?" replied Beryl, still vaguely trying to defend her beloved Esther.

"I don't see what that's got to do with it. There's no specially smart livery for duchesses except at Coronations and top-hole shows like that: and as for bein' married, you'd think that a woman who'd got

a husband well in tow wouldn't be so fussy about her looks as one who was still on the marry."

"But Cousin Esther couldn't be on the marry, Jocko: she's much too old for falling in love, and that sort of thing."

"Of course she is," agreed the Marquis, whose measure of time was the same as Beryl's, being viewed from a similar standpoint; "but that's no reason why she shouldn't make herself fit to be seen. She can wear the young willow if she likes; but for goodness' sake let her have a decent frock under it!"

The new Lady Westerham looked thoughtful. "I know that Cousin Esther and people of that age couldn't fall in love; but I wonder if anybody does—even young people, I mean—as they do in novels and poems. What do you think, Jocko?"

Lord Tamford looked very wise. "Well, if you ask me, I should say that the Johnnies who write poems and novels pile up the agony most frightfully. Of course, there is such a thing as fallin' in love: nobody would be such a silly ass as to deny that; but I always think it's the most tremendously overrated business."

"That's just what I think," said Beryl.

"Of course, I've been in love lots of times: all the fellows of my age have, and I don't deny that it's pretty hot and strong while it lasts. But to pretend that it's all that Romeo-and-Juliet and Darby-and-Joan sort of business—or that it lasts for ever—well, I say that's bally rot!"

"Wilfred thinks that what the poets say is true," said Wilfred's wife.

The Marquis smiled indulgently, as at the imaginations of a child. "Oh! old Wilfred's just the sort to spread himself over a thing like love, and to believe

all the nursery rhymes that are written about it: but there's nothin' in that to write home about," he remarked in the slang of his day. "There is a good deal of the innocent kid about young Wilfred, and—mind you—I think none the worse of him for it, though a fellow can't help laughin' at him a bit on the sly. But if you take my advice, you'll leave him to his Romeo-and-Juliet and Darby-and-Joan ideas, and not try to laugh him out of them: they'll make things a jolly sight better for you than if he'd grown too big for his nursery rhymes. I can tell you that, Berry."

Beryl, as usual, accepted Jocko's dictum as the last word on any subject, and then the two young people finished their supper and went upstairs together.

When the Duchess's party was over, and Lord and Lady Westerham were on their way home in the electric brougham that they kept for town wear, Wilfred put his arm round his wife and would have kissed her, but she drew her slim shoulders out of his embrace.

"Oh! do be careful, Wilfred; you're messing me dreadfully."

Westerham laughed. "What does that matter now that the party is over?"

"It doesn't matter messing my hair now that we are going home: but it will matter dreadfully if you crush my frock."

"Then let me mess your hair alone, sweetheart: I'll be content with that." And the infatuated husband laid his cheek against the golden curls.

But not for long. "Now you are spoiling my tiara," said Beryl, wriggling away from him.

Westerham drew back slightly chilled, and contented himself with seizing the small gloved hand and

holding it fast. "The Duchess's party was a great success," he said; "she has the gift of success, as well as the social instinct, and so her entertainments always go off well."

Now that her clothes were no longer in jeopardy, Beryl was quite ready to play the loving wife—within reason. "What a funny boy you are for always finding some high-flown reason for things!" she said pleasantly; "for my part, I don't see where gifts and instincts come in. I think Cousin Eleanor's parties go off well simply because she has heaps of money and crowds of well-trained servants. And then the presence of the Royalties always gives spice to things, and makes everything more exciting and cheerful."

"Esther was talking about that," said Westerham, "and saying how the sight of Royalty always made her want to cry."

"Made her want to cry! What on earth for? I don't call that making things more exciting and cheerful."

"It is the same feeling in essence that you call exciting and cheerful," Westerham explained—or rather endeavoured to explain; "don't you know the kind of thrill which makes you want to cry and to shout for joy at the same time?"

"I haven't an idea what you mean."

"I mean the thrill you feel when you see weddings, or processions, or soldiers, or fire-engines, or any other glorious symbols of things."

"But I never want to cry unless I'm miserable: and then I don't do it for fear of spoiling my eye-lashes. And I can't see why you should cry at soldiers, unless they're friends of yours and going out to India; or at fire-engines, unless your own house

is on fire and they can't put it out. And people never cry at weddings now : it's most dreadfully old-fashioned, even for the bride's mother ; and it's shockingly disfiguring. It's really very queer of Cousin Esther to feel like that."

"I don't think it's queer at all."

"Then do these things make you want to cry too, Wilfred ? "

"Not cry exactly, because I'm a man. But they give me thrills down my back and lumps in my throat."

Remembering Tamford's wise counsel, Beryl continued to make herself agreeable to her husband. "I shouldn't like to cry because of my eyelashes, but I think I should rather enjoy the thrill feeling. What else gives it to you ? "

"Christmas does."

"But why Christmas more than Michaelmas or Lady Day ? "

"Because Christmas is the symbol of the apotheosis of Childhood, and is the festival of the children."

Beryl shrugged her shoulders. "Then I can understand why it makes people want to cry if it reminds them of children. I hate children."

Westerham winced as if he had been struck. "Oh, no, my darling, you don't mean that ! "

"Yes, I do. I hate children, because they are so noisy and tiresome : I've always hated them," replied his wife cheerfully, quite unconscious of the fact that it is by remarks such as this that women lower the ideal of womanhood in the eyes of men. "Tell me some more things that give you this thrill," she continued.

Westerham loyally tried to close his eyes to her obtuseness. "I've felt it out hunting, on one of those

typical hunting mornings when the air seemed to be full of the spirit of sport, and that particular field the temporary embodiment of that spirit," he replied, endeavouring to come down to his wife's level.

With an equally praiseworthy effort she attempted to rise to his. "Oh, then I know what you mean: it's what I call enjoyment; the 'Merry Widow Waltz' gives it to me with a really good partner; and I've felt it for a new frock and even for a box of *marrons glacés* from Fuller's. But how funny that you and Cousin Esther should feel like that over Royalties and soldiers and fire-engines and Christmas!"

Even the infatuated Westerham could not go on with the conversation after this, so he wisely changed the subject. However tightly he tried to close his eyes, some glimpses of his wife's limitations could not fail to intrude themselves upon his vision. "I wonder why you always call Esther '*Cousin Esther*,'" he said; "surely now that you are raised to the status of a married woman you might call her 'Esther'?"

But Beryl demurred. "Oh! no, Wilfred, I'm sure Aunt Cecilia would not like it. She is always so particular about showing respect to one's elders, and that sort of thing. I believe she'd be as much shocked if I said 'Eleanor' and 'Esther' as if I said 'Cecilia.'"

Westerham winced again. Did Esther seem as old to Beryl as that? The cruelty of youth hit him in the face, and it was with a sensation of relief that he found himself at his own front-door and so not called upon to make any reply.

CHAPTER III

MARRIED LIFE

"LET us go over to tea at the Dower House," said Lord Westerham to his wife one summer's afternoon after the London season had ended and the fashionable world had gone back to the land.

"Certainly," said Beryl, springing up from her deck chair on the lawn, where she was endeavouring to drown *ennui* in one of the latest novels. She was always ready to embrace any opportunity of eluding a *tête-à-tête* with her lord and master. Since lunch he had been closeted with his agent in his own business-room, engaged on affairs of the estate, and so had given her a short holiday from his conversation and caresses; but now he was let loose again she was only too thankful to dilute his society with that of her aunt and cousin.

She picked up her garden hat, which was lying on the grass beside her chair, and put it on her golden curls with the carelessness of assured beauty: she was one of those rare women who are lovely enough to regard a looking-glass as a luxury rather than a necessity. To most women it is the exact opposite: "Pleasure to have it none, to lose it pain," as Lancelot remarked about something quite different, but the principle is the same. The majority of women do not look in the glass so much to give pleasure to themselves as to avoid giving pain to others by a vision

of untidy hair and crooked head-gear. The woman who can put on or take off her hat without unconsciously praying for the aid of a looking-glass, is either absolutely beautiful or hopelessly plain: she has abundantly realized her feminine desire to look well, or else has finally renounced it. Young Lady Westerham did not even administer a pat to her curls after crushing them down under her large straw hat: she knew that they were beyond all praise or patting, and that no effort of hers could enhance their golden glory. So she wisely forbore to make any.

"I always love to go to the Dower House," remarked Westerham, as they strolled across the lawns on their way to the park. "I delight in the atmosphere of the place, it is so restful."

His wife shook her pretty head. "I don't agree with you about the atmosphere. I always think Aunt Cecilia keeps the rooms too cold. She'd consider it somehow more religious to sit in a cold room than in a warm one."

"I didn't mean the physical atmosphere, darling," Wilfred gently explained.

"Then what did you mean? I always thought atmosphere meant hotness or coldness."

"So it does in one sense; but I was referring to the mental atmosphere. Don't you know that there is a mental atmosphere which warms or chills your mind and soul just as a physical atmosphere warms or chills your body?"

Beryl sighed to herself. Here he was, at it again as fresh as ever! It was all very well for Tamford to say in his boyish slang that there was "nothing to write home about" in Wilfred's manner of conversation; but Tamford didn't have to listen to it hour after hour and day after day as she did!

"I don't a bit understand what you are driving at," she repeated doggedly.

"Don't you feel the minute you enter a house that the place is congenial or uncongenial to you, before a word has been spoken."

"Of course, if the furniture is shabby and the wall-papers are dirty I feel I am going to hate it," Beryl admitted.

"I don't mean that in the very least. Don't you feel something intangible—quite apart from the furniture or the wall-papers or anything visible—which either attracts your mind or repels it as the case may be? Something that you can't explain?"

"If you can feel it, why can't you explain it? I can always explain everything I feel."

"I can explain it to people who would understand my explanation. It is the same sort of sensation to your mind as cold or heat is to your body: something which affects your subconscious rather than your conscious self."

Beryl remembered Tamford's advice to "play up" to her husband when he chose to "spread himself," and she manfully struggled to follow it. "You mean the difference in your feelings when you are with people you like, and when you are with people you don't like: of course, I understand that right enough."

Westerham likewise was very patient and persevering. "No, that isn't exactly what I mean, though it is akin to it. What I mean is that people create a mental atmosphere which pervades their houses even when they themselves are not present; and which other people, who are sensitive to such impressions, recognize and are influenced by instantly. Lady Westerham and Esther are such restful people that they have

impregnated their house with an atmosphere of rest; and their house retains this atmosphere even when they themselves are not in it."

"Oh, Westerham, what an absurd idea! As if houses and rooms could be affected by the character of the people who live in them! You'll be saying next that our dinner-table is selfish, or that our drawing-room chairs are frivolous, or that the umbrella-stand in the hall is addicted to drinking; and then the next stage will be that you'll want all the furniture to go to church on Sundays, and sit in the servants' pew. It will be awfully inconvenient when it is the dining-room table's Sunday out; or if the stair-carpet wishes to attend Sunday-school!" And Beryl laughed at her own quaint conceit.

Westerham laughed too, but half-heartedly: a joke out of season is as bad as a pheasant in September. "Spiritual things must be spiritually apprehended," he said somewhat sententiously.

"I never heard such a silly idea," continued Beryl, still laughing. "I should think it is quite original, and understood by no one but yourself."

"Not a bit of it: the Duchess understands it perfectly, and of course Esther does."

Beryl shook her head. "Cousin Esther would pretend she did even if she didn't, she is so kind and sympathetic: but I'm sure Cousin Eleanor is far too sensible to understand anything so silly."

"Indeed she isn't. She told me herself that she was a different woman in each of her different houses because their respective atmospheres affected her differently; she said she was worldly at Mershire House, romantic in Scotland, sensible at Tamford, and religious at Stoneham Abbey."

Beryl again demurred. "Cousin Eleanor isn't what

I call a religious woman : she dresses too well, and is too merry and cheerful."

"I think you do both Religion and Eleanor an injustice," replied Westerham dryly.

But his wife was pursuing her own train of thought. "Cousin Eleanor doesn't like me : she never has done."

Wilfred's marital loyalty was at once up in arms. "What nonsense, my darling ! She must like you ! Nobody could help liking anybody as beautiful as you are !"

But Beryl knew considerably better than that. "Couldn't they, though ? Ninety-nine women out of every hundred could—and would—you bet !" And she laughed contentedly to herself. "But Cousin Eleanor isn't like that," she added judiciously ; "she isn't a bit the sort of woman to hate another woman because she is better looking than she is. Cousin Eleanor is awfully straight, and there's never anything mean about her. You should just hear Jocko talk about his mother : he thinks there's nobody like her !"

"And quite right of him ! There never is anybody like one's mother. I wish you could have known my mother, Beryl ; I should have loved her to kiss you once before she died." And Westerham's voice broke so that he could not go on.

But his wife did not notice the break, neither did she feel the slightest regret at having missed the acquaintance of the late Mrs. Wyvern. She had no patience with filial sentiment. It slightly bored her even when the admirable Tamford dwelt too long upon the perfections of his maternal parent ; but then, she felt, he had the excuse of his mother being a duchess.

"I dare say we shouldn't have got on together," she coldly replied ; "people hardly ever get on with

their mothers-in-law. It's a tiresome sort of relationship, I think."

Westerham winced as if he had been struck. Whenever he spoke of his mother he felt that he was standing upon holy ground; and Beryl's heartless comment was to him sacrilege. Therefore—as his wife expressed it to herself—he "dried up" until they reached the Dower House, and found the Dowager Countess and her two daughters having tea upon the lawn.

The former welcomed them with a warmth which in one usually so stately almost amounted to effusion. Like all old people she had learnt to submit to the inevitable—not a difficult lesson to a woman of her placid temperament—and as her daughter had declined to reign in her stead at Wyvern's End, there was no one whom she would sooner see there than her niece. Beryl made a strong appeal both to the Dowager's sense of beauty and to her instinct of kinship—two very powerful factors in the government of her ladyship's impulses—and the young woman's youth and beauty were a constant delight to her aunt's tired old eyes.

Esther's face likewise quickened into real pleasure as Westerham and his bride opened the gate which led from the park to the lawn. The pain of seeing the two together, having no selfishness or jealousy to batten upon, had almost faded out of existence; and in its stead she was beginning once more to experience the joy of constant communion with a spirit so finely attuned to her own as was Wilfred's. By losing her life she had found it, and she was gradually realizing that a friendship approved by her conscience brought her truer and more abiding joy than a love which that same conscience declined to tolerate.

There are some moral palates that have a marked inclination towards the taste of forbidden fruit : there are others for whom the fact that it is forbidden robs the fruit of all its flavour. Esther Wyvern belonged to the latter class : and herein both her mother and her sister misunderstood the nature of her sacrifice. It was not so much that she renounced her own happiness because she did not think it right to accept it, as that it ceased to be happiness when she ceased to consider it right. Hers was one of those rare souls that love righteousness and hate iniquity by instinct : therefore the oil of gladness was bound to be her portion either in this world or in the world to come.

But whilst the Dowager and Lady Esther greeted their visitors with a smile of sincere welcome, no such illumination transfigured the countenance of the Duchess. She had never liked Beryl : she liked her still less now that the girl had appropriated to herself Esther's heart's desire, and the Duchess was far too great a lady to pretend anything which she did not feel. Although, to the casual observer, she was far more agreeable and easygoing and what is called "affable" than were her mother and sister, underneath all her charm and ease and affability there was a hard spot in her Grace's character which had no counterpart in the gentle natures of the other two. People who were frightened of Lady Westerham and Lady Esther, professed themselves "quite at home" with the Duchess; yet—had they known the truth—the Duchess was really the one to be frightened of. A relation of theirs once said that Lady Westerham and Esther were like nuts—a hard shell with a sweet kernel inside; while Eleanor was like a peach—soft outside and hard in the middle. And that relation was not far wrong. The Duchess had no patience at all with

what she called "silliness"; on the other hand, Lady Westerham and Esther were very tolerant of this quality in the young and good-looking—though probably they called it by some other name. The Duchess did not really like young people (with the exception of her own children), although she delighted and charmed them: Lady Westerham and Esther really did like them, although their ladyships frightened them to death. Now Beryl had a strong strain of so-called "silliness," which her fond aunt and unmarried cousin called "freshness and simplicity," and found altogether charming: the Duchess, on the contrary, could not tolerate the quality, and longed to box its possessor's ears every time it was displayed. Lady Westerham always described Beryl as "a sweet young creature"; the Duchess spoke of her as "a little minx."

When greetings had been exchanged and chairs provided and tea dispensed, the Duchess remarked: "You'll have to send for some fresh tea, Esther: the present supply has outlived its reputation and will get on Westerham and Beryl's nerves."

Her mother demurred. "It hasn't been made long, Eleanor. I don't think Perkins will like to make fresh tea again so soon."

"Oh, Mamma, how you do spoil your servants! I'm sure you've ruined many a caller's digestion by dosing them with neat tannin rather than hurt poor old Perkins's feelings by ordering fresh tea."

Lady Westerham looked grieved. It was agony to her to feel that she had hurt even a hair on a fellow-creature's head. "Oh! my love, I trust you are mistaken. I could not bear to think that any one was the worse for having partaken of my hospitality."

But the Duchess was enjoying her mother's discom-

future and had no mercy. "That is the great responsibility of entertaining other people," she continued; "the man who dines with you puts his digestion for the time being into the hollow of your hand, just as the man who loves you puts his heart for the time being into the hollow of your hand: and it is just as bad to ruin a man's digestion as it is to break his heart. Worse, really, because they mind it so much more."

"The tea is quite all right, Lady Westerham," said Wilfred manfully, coming to the rescue and gulping down a cup; "isn't it, Beryl?"

But Beryl was one of those people who think a great deal about what they eat and drink. "I agree with Cousin Eleanor that it is getting too strong; and cold as well," she added as an afterthought.

"Greedy little wretch!" said the Duchess to herself, regardless of the fact that it was she who had started the hare which Beryl had caught and cooked. The fact that Beryl was only following her lead, in no way lessened her Grace's condemnation of her young cousin.

"Then, of course, Esther, we must send for some fresh tea at once. Perhaps Wilfred will not mind our troubling him to ring the drawing-room bell."

Wilfred did not mind his trouble at all; but he could not help wishing that his wife had backed him up in his effort to save trouble to other people. But he had yet to learn that it was not Beryl's way to consider other people when her own comfort was concerned. When he returned from his bell-ringing he found the Duchess still rattling on in her usual inconsequent manner—

"Do you remember years ago, before I was married, Esther, when you and I used to pour out tea for

Mamma's callers in Eaton Square, how when nobody was looking I used to put my little finger in the teapot to feel if the tea was hot enough for the next comer?"

The Duchess and Esther laughed at the recollection, but their mother looked shocked, as indeed she was. "You put your finger in the teapot, Eleanor? I never heard of such an improper trick! I should have forbidden it at once had I known of it."

"Of course you would," retorted the merry offender; "and that is why you never did hear of it: Esther and I saw to that."

Lady Westerham could not get over the revelation at all. "I never heard of such a thing," she repeated; "and in *my* house, too!"

"And in *your* teapot, too!" ejaculated the Duchess, who was enjoying herself immensely. "But all the same, Mamma, it was not half so bad as giving the people tea that had stood too long. My little finger couldn't injure their digestions, and tannin could. It was a dear little finger and quite a pretty little finger in those days: but now, alas, like the tea it has stood too long!" And her Grace looked down at her plump hands with a sigh.

"And like the tea it has grown strong with standing," added Lord Westerham; "for now it is strong enough for you to twist the Duke round it."

"Good for you!" retorted the Duchess.

"I think that Beryl is looking very tired," said Esther, as usual intent on the sufferings of others. "Do you feel the heat very much, Beryl?" she added, turning to her cousin.

"I do feel rather tired, but I don't think it is the heat," replied Beryl: and she had the grace not to add what she was thinking, namely, that she was not tired,

but bored; and not with the heat, but with her husband. "In fact, it seems quite cool here after town."

"I expect you did too much in town, and now are feeling the consequences, my dear," said her aunt. "I cannot say that I approve of too much gaiety for young people—especially in such heated and crowded rooms. I never think that Eleanor looks so well after the London season as she does before."

"Thank you for classing me among the young people, Mamma: it is most gratifying, and does me a world of good."

"You always seem young to me, my love," replied Lady Westerham simply. "I suppose that you and Esther will really soon approach middle age; but to me you will always be girls—or, rather, children."

"Soon approach middle age!" repeated the Duchess; "what a sweet way of putting it! I'm sorry to say, however, that my approach shot for middle age is already played, and that I shall shortly be holed out and ready to hit off for the next hole called Elderly."

"I beg leave to contradict the statement of my noble friend," exclaimed Westerham. "I maintain that age cannot wither nor custom stale her infinite variety."

"Perhaps not," remarked the Duchess; "but it can stiffen her joints and increase her weight—and it will do so if you will only give it time."

"Precisely," retorted his lordship; "that is my whole point: it will require a great deal of time before it can accomplish a consummation so devoutly to be prayed against."

And so the conversation drifted on in that easy and irresponsible manner only possible among people who

are very intimate with each other, until it was time for the Duchess and the Westerhams to repair to their respective homes.

One day not long after this—as Wilfred was walking up the avenue that led from the village to Wyvern's End—he met the doctor coming down from the Hall, and stopped to speak to him.

“Nobody ill up at my place, I hope?” he said, after they had congratulated themselves and each other on the beauty of the weather.

“No, no, Lord Westerham, certainly not; quite the reverse, if I may say so.” And Dr. Taylor rubbed his hands together with pleasure. “I have only just been up to Wyvern's End to see her ladyship.”

Wilfred started. His love for Beryl fired his anxiety at once. “What is the matter with Lady Westerham? She seemed all right when I went out this morning.”

“And so she is—as right as a trivet: your lordship need have no anxiety on that score. Lady Westerham only wanted me to assure her that a certain suspicion she had formed was a correct one, and that I have been able to do with the greatest pleasure in the world. I cannot tell you, Lord Westerham, what a joy it is to me—who have lived at Wyvern all my life, and my father before me—to know that the title is not going to die out, but will descend in the direct line this time. And as for her ladyship, she is splendidly well and strong, and I am sure you need have no anxiety on her account whatsoever. I congratulate you heartily, my lord: it is the best bit of news I have heard for many a long day!” And the worthy man's eyes were filled with tears of joy as he grasped Wilfred's hand in the exuberance of his delight.

Westerham thanked him civilly and then hurried

on, longing to be alone in what he felt was one of the supreme moments of his life. It would be impossible to put into words the effect upon Wilfred of Dr. Taylor's information. He was one of the few people who have learned that it is the simple events of life that are stupendous—the commonplace things that are cosmic. The fact that he was to become a father seemed in some inexplicable way to make him an integral part of the universe as a whole—a link in that indissoluble chain which holds the centuries together, and will hold them until Time shall be no more. He was no longer a mere individual man: he was Mankind—an essential part of Humanity itself. Until now he had thought of himself as Wilfred Wyvern—the Wilfred Wyvern who had toiled as a journalist and succeeded to a peerage; and who had loved and lost Esther Wyvern, and had wooed and won Beryl Delaney. But suddenly he realized that he was something greater than any individual worker, or lover, or landowner—he was Man: Man who was made in the image of God, and whose nature God took upon Himself. And as Man he was not only one with God, he was also one with Nature—with that universal Mother who never fails to fulfil the promise of the first rainbow, and to bring round the seasons in their turn, so that summer and winter, seed-time and harvest, shall not cease upon the earth. For the moment his individuality dropped from him like a cast-off garment, and he tasted of the ineffable glory of being one with the Universe. He took his part in the chorus of the constellations, and felt the little hills rejoice on every side; before him the valleys broke forth into singing, and all the trees of the field clapped their hands.

But this ecstasy of exaltation in his oneness with

Nature was soon succeeded by a more tender and less impersonal mood. His whole being was overwhelmed with a flood of passionate tenderness for his wife—for the woman who had placed upon his brow the crown of his manhood, and by the chrism of whose suffering he was to be anointed a king among men. It was to her that he owed this happiness that was coming to him: her hand held the key that would admit him into his kingdom. To Wilfred—as to all true men—the most sacred thing in the universe, next to Godhead, was Motherhood; and as he thought of Beryl as a mother, his love for her was transfigured into worship; for to him she suddenly represented the Motherhood of the world.

When the man who was made in God's image was bidden to name the wife whom God had given to him, he called her by no angel title nor by any name descriptive of human beauty: he called her name Eve, because she was the mother of all living—even Eden could suggest no sweeter name for womanhood than the name of Mother.

All these thoughts rushed one after the other through Wilfred's mind as he hurried homewards and hastened to prostrate himself in spirit at the feet of the woman whom he fervently adored: the woman who was henceforward to be holy to him as the mother of his child.

He found her in her boudoir; and for a moment he was tongue-tied by the intensity of his emotion, and found it almost impossible to speak. But the instant Beryl saw his face she knew that he shared her secret, and her spirit rose up in fierce rebellion against the joy that she read there.

He knelt down beside her chair and tried to put his arms around her. "My darling," he whispered

in broken accents, "let us thank God—together—for the glorious happiness He has sent us!"

But she shook him off. "Oh, Westerham, for Heaven's sake don't begin all that sickly sentimentality when everything is so horrid! I can't bear it! 'Glorious happiness' indeed! I call it the most hateful and detestable nuisance I ever came across. Now I shan't be able to hunt all next winter, or wear any of my new dresses at the county balls: and instead of being sorry for me you begin all that sentimental rot about 'glorious happiness.' It's more than I can stand—it really is!" And she burst into a flood of angry tears.

CHAPTER IV

LORD WINFIELDALE

THE spring had come round again, and had brought with it a great happiness to Wyvern's End; for on a showery April morning a son and heir was born to Lord Westerham to take up the second title—that of Viscount Winfieldale—which had lain dormant for so long. There had not been a Lord Winfieldale since the late Earl was a child, as he succeeded to the peerage when he was quite a boy; and thus the name had been in abeyance for nearly seventy years. But at last a new little claimant had appeared upon the scene, whom the neighbourhood in general, and his own family in particular, welcomed with the utmost delight and rejoicing.

It is beyond the power of words to describe the feelings of Lord Westerham when, for the first time, he held his firstborn son in his arms. The instinct of fatherhood was very strong in him: he was by nature what was known in Victorian parlance as "a highly domestic man." But in addition to this, and in spite of his democratic upbringing and modern tendencies, he possessed the pride of race in a marked degree. And the word *pride* as used here does not mean arrogant assumption, or haughty ostentation, or even a fastidious sense of superiority: it means, rather, a sense of the responsibility entailed upon one who belongs to a great order—a consciousness of the strain put upon one who forms a link in a long chain.

Esther understood Wilfred when she told her sister that he regarded being an earl as some men regard being a clergyman : as a call to a great office, weighted with heavy if high responsibilities. And as Westerham looked at his baby son he realized that here was yet another member of the great order—another link in the long chain. He had fulfilled one of the duties entailed upon him by handing the torch of life on into the tiny fingers that now fluttered so feebly in his; and now it was his further duty to see that these tiny fingers were so trained and strengthened—these baby hands kept so pure and clean—that they in turn should hand on the sacred torch unquenched and undimmed to the generations that were yet for to come.

To the Dowager Countess the birth of the baby was a source of unalloyed joy. She was too large-souled a woman to feel any bitterness because the happiness which had been denied to her had been granted to her niece—the crowning joy of having borne a man into the world. In her youth she had mourned that it had not been given to her to carry on the name of Wyvern and the title of Westerham; but with the wisdom of age she had learned that as long as the desired end is accomplished, it is not for us to dictate who shall be the instruments that are called upon to accomplish that end. She had gone up from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, as Moses went, and there she had learned the secret of the Lord, as Moses learned it—the secret of perfect submission founded upon the absolute knowledge that the Lord loveth His people, and that all His saints lie safe in the hollow of His Hand.

The story of Moses is a story continually re-enacted among men unto this day. One man labours, and another man enters into his labours : one man leads

the people through the wilderness, and another takes them over into the promised land. And at first sight this seems somewhat hard: as the story of Moses seems somewhat hard until we look more deeply into it and learn the lessons that it is meant to teach. Then the first thought which strikes us is this: it was the act of Moses himself, and not the act of God, that prevented the great leader of the people from entering into the promised land. "Because ye trespassed against Me in the wilderness of Zin." When we are tempted to rail against God for apparently ignoring us who have borne the burden and heat of the day in favour of those who have come in at the eleventh hour, may it not be that the onus of the act lies with ourselves and not with Him—that some want of submission has left us unfit to complete the work which we began? It is no arbitrary punishment on His part, but the inevitable consequence of our own trespass in the wilderness of Zin.

And the second thought is that the death of Moses on the top of Pisgah, after seeing the vision of the land into which he might not enter, is not the end of the story. We see him once again, also on the top of a mountain, and this time the mountain is in the midst of the promised land. It has all come right in the end. His trespass is blotted out, and he has entered into both the earthly and the heavenly Canaan. And why? Because there is One standing beside him on this mountain, Whose face shines as the sun and Whose raiment is white as the light. Alone, Moses could never have entered the land of promise; but now he is standing there in his glory. And so it may be with all those successors of Moses who die alone in the wilderness, having seen their fellows pass on without them into the promised land. The end of their

story is not yet. They too shall one day stand on the top of the everlasting mountains, and possess the good land lying at their feet : for beside them shall stand One Who has blotted out their trespasses and has led them across the river into the promised land. Through Him they shall inherit all things ; and the disappointments of this life shall be remembered no more for ever.

Great as was old Lady Westerham's joy in the advent of little Lord Winfieldale, it was as nothing compared with the joy of Lady Esther. In the first place, Lady Westerham's instinct of motherhood had been satisfied nearly half a century ago, while Esther's was unsatisfied still. The wealth of maternal love stored away in the hearts of all good women had found in Lady Westerham's case its natural outlet ; but Esther's store was still undiminished, and had no one upon whom to expend itself. She was too young to feel maternal when Eleanor's boys were born, for Esther was a woman whose character developed late : to them she had always been as an indulgent elder sister. But now that her heart was fully awakened, and her womanly instincts finely touched to fine issues, Wilfred's son seemed to supply her spirit's need ; and upon this child she lavished the wealth of devotion which she had unconsciously—and alas ! vainly—accumulated for children of her own.

And there was another reason why the baby meant so much to her : to her he seemed to be the seal of the Divine approval of her rejection of Wilfred. She had stood on one side and let Wilfred marry a younger woman in order that a son might be born to the house of Westerham to carry on the race of his fathers to untold generations. She was far too old-fashioned—far too modestly reticent on these matters—to have

put such a thought into words, even to herself; but the thought had been at the back of her mind all the time. Wilfred was the last male representative of the Wyvern family; if he left no son the title would die out; and this subconscious and unexpressed idea was one of the principal factors in influencing Esther's decision to refuse Westerham in order that he might marry a younger woman.

And now that the son had actually come, Esther felt that her decision was more than justified. His father's and grandfather's title would not die out: the estates would not pass into the hands of strangers. Winfieldale would carry on the Westerham name and the Westerham traditions, and a Wyvern would continue to reign at Wyvern's End.

Esther did not hate the infant (as a spirit of the baser sort might have done) because he was Beryl's child; she loved him because he was Wilfred's; and she loved him still more because he was the representative of her own family, and would one day be the head of her own house. He was the embodiment of all that she respected and revered as a Wyvern; he was the incarnation of all that she doted on and delighted in as a woman; what wonder then that her love for Wilfred's son became almost a stronger and more absorbing passion than her love for Wilfred himself had been?

Great was the rejoicing among the tenantry and villagers at the birth of the son and heir. There was much of the best part of the feudal spirit still lingering in this out-of-the-way Kentish village; which spirit shrank in dismay at the idea of "The Family" dying out and "The Place" being sold into the hands of strangers. There had been Wyverns at Wyvern's End long before the first Earl of Westerham had been

raised to the peerage; and because they had been a race worthy of their position and loyal to the traditions of their order, their people had loved them and had prospered under their sway.

There was only one person who did not rejoice at the advent of Lord Winfieldale, and who failed to welcome the child with love and thanksgiving, and that person, strange to say, was the baby's mother! Beryl was one of the few women who are utterly devoid of the maternal instinct; and, moreover, she could not forgive her son for having entirely spoiled her enjoyment during the past winter. Also she disliked him for having been the cause of pain and suffering to her precious self. Beryl loved her body for its splendid health and its almost perfect beauty; consequently she found it hard to pardon any one who in any way dimmed for a time these splendours. She also was keenly sensitive to both physical pleasures and physical pains; and here again she owed a grudge to the poor little Viscount.

As is the case with all supremely good-looking people, it never occurred to her to assume a virtue if she had it not. She herself was so beautiful that she felt it was enough just to be herself, without attempting to flavour that self to suit the tastes of other people. It never entered her head that she was lacking in anything; so that, therefore, it naturally never suggested itself to her to repair a lack which she was unaware existed. It was not that she was conceited: the word *conceit* implies an imaginary or exaggerated existence on the part of the quality which inspires the conceit, and Beryl in no way imagined or exaggerated her own beauty. She had not brains enough to have imagined anything so exquisite as her own face; and it would have been difficult for any-

body—even for an artistic genius—to have exaggerated her loveliness. As far as physical beauty went, she knew that she had practically attained perfection; and further than physical beauty went was a length to which she could not and would not have cared to go; it lay altogether beyond her mental horizon.

Therefore, as she did not care for her baby, she made no attempt to pretend that she did, and was as unconscious as was Lord Winfieldale himself that her attitude of mind shocked and horrified her family and domestic circle beyond measure. Her female servants were openly disgusted, and discussed the matter freely among themselves: her female relations were inwardly distressed, but outwardly full of extenuating circumstances and excuses for her strange conduct; and as for her husband, he kept his comments locked up in his own breast, and what he thought or what he suffered no one knew.

There was much discussion as to the most desirable name for the infant; and when it was finally decided that he should be called "Wilfred Peregrine," after his two immediate predecessors, everybody was pleased. The Dowager Countess in particular felt that a sort of halo was placed upon the child in giving it the name of her late revered husband, and Eleanor and Esther fully approved of his being "called after Papa." "Wilfred" was added at Esther's suggestion—a suggestion heartily endorsed by her mother and sister, and fully appreciated by the father of the child. As to Beryl, she said it did not matter to her what the boy was christened, as she should always call him "Winfieldale," and perhaps "Win" for short. To her the title meant much more than the name.

In the interval after the birth of the baby and before

Beryl was up and about again, Lord Westerham spent a great deal of time at the Dower House, solely for the pleasure of talking about his son to a sympathetic audience. Beryl did not care to talk much about the baby: it was a subject which soon began to bore her. Now that she was fast regaining her strength, her mind was full of the pleasures upon which that strength should be expended as soon as she was up and out; and, as was usual with the young Countess, the words of her mouth and the meditations of her heart were identical. If she was not interested in a thing, she never troubled to talk about that thing: the interest of her fellow-conversationalists was not on the map, as far as she was concerned.

But the Dowager and Lady Esther talked about the boy to Wilfred's heart's content. They loved the subject as much as he did, and were never weary of expatiating upon the baby's intrinsic excellences, and upon the promise of his future career. The Duchess, too, was a born child-lover, and still hungered for those babies of her own who had long ago left that condition of life behind them. Therefore any small being who recalled to her the babyhood of her two big sons was dear to her Grace's heart.

"I shall put him down for Eton at once," Westerham remarked to the Dower House inmates when Lord Winfieldale was about a week old: "there is no time to be lost. I am sure he is a very intelligent child: the nurse says he has a remarkably fine head."

The Duchess—who happened to have been lunching with her mother—looked at Wilfred to see whether he were joking; but he was not, he was quite serious. The early stages of parenthood are not as a rule conducive to the cultivation of humour—at least, not in the parent.

"Well, whatever you do," she said, "don't bring him up on the modern system which makes it a fundamental rule that children shall at all costs be prevented from ever doing anything that they don't like. I hear that the rule at all these modern new-fangled schools is that boys are asked if they would like to go in for classics or mathematics, and if they say 'Neither,' they are allowed to keep rabbits instead."

"May I ask if you include Eton among what you call 'modern and newfangled schools'?" asked Westerham, whose sense of humour—when it was turned off the baby—was still quite perceptible.

"Of course not. I'm talking about preparatory schools—the only places, except their mothers' knees, where boys ever learn anything. When they are old enough to go to public schools the time for learning is past, and the power too. All that Jocko and Archie really know is what I taught them when they were little, and what they picked up at a preparatory school before they were old enough to go to Eton. And a very excellent and liberal education it was—especially the former part!"

But no true grandmother could have let such a statement pass unchallenged. At any rate, the Dowager Countess of Westerham could not. "My dear Eleanor, I do not like to hear you make such sweeping assertions about the dear boys not having learnt anything since they were children. I always think they are so clever and intelligent."

"So they are, Mamma: but being clever and well-educated are totally different things. I didn't say they couldn't *do* anything; I only said they didn't *know* anything, which is not at all the same thing. And as a matter of fact, I didn't even say that: I said they

didn't know much except what they'd learnt from me; and that covers a large field of education, I can assure you."

"But, my dear," persisted Lady Westerham, "I do not like your idea that a boy's education is ever finished. Surely he goes on learning, even after he is a man."

"Especially if he is a married man," added Wilfred.

The Duchess shook her head. "Not really: Tammy has never learnt anything from me. He learnt all he really knows at the knees of the old Duchess before I was born; and a miserable education it was—at least according to my ideas!"

The perplexed and distressed expression which her elder daughter's conversation so frequently evoked, now clouded Lady Westerham's brow. "My love, I do not like to hear you speak disrespectfully of the late Duchess. She was a dear friend of mine, and a great lady in every sense of the word."

"I never said she wasn't: I only said she taught Tammy a lot of balderdash—just as the tiresome girl that Jocko marries will think, when her time comes, what a lot of balderdash I taught him. People talk about what a great deal of influence women have over men, and it's quite true they have: but the men they really influence are not their husbands, but their sons. Wives may plant annuals in the hearts of men, but mothers plant perennials."

"I am sure, my dear," Lady Westerham remonstrated, "that men are quite as much attached to their wives as they are to their mothers, though of course in a different way."

The Duchess freely admitted this. "Certainly they are, and much sillier about them. But it is the mothers who have the real and abiding influence.

Wives can break hearts, but only mothers can mould them. Why, the very fact that their hearts are breakable, proves that they have passed out of the fluid stage and become set. I quite see that a man would be much more ready to stand on his head to please his wife than to please his mother—especially when he was engaged; but, nevertheless, it was his mother who taught him to walk on his feet! And that principle runs through everything.”

“You mean that the wives don’t get hold of men until the teachable stage is over,” said Westerham.

“Exactly,” replied her Grace; “and that is why I think the child-marriages in India must prove such satisfactory arrangements. Then the wife has the same odds as the mother and the preparatory school. Of all those fine old crusted lies which we call proverbs, there is none more misleading than ‘Never too old to learn.’ As a matter of fact, we are too old at twelve!”

Westerham realized with a sort of shock the truth of the Duchess’s words; he felt that it was really his mother who had guided and controlled his character, and that his wife could never interfere with his mother’s work. And subconsciously he was glad of this. He knew how much more competent to guide and govern a man was the late Mrs. Wyvern than the present Lady Westerham. And then another thought flashed across his mind, and brought with it a sharp click of pain: the thought that it was Beryl who would have the power of moulding the character of his newborn son—Beryl, with all her selfishness and frivolity and coldness of heart. And for a moment—until his love for his wife rose up in arms and conquered it—this thought was anguish to him.

In far less time than it takes to write them, these thoughts rushed in quick succession through Lord Westerham's mind; then he recalled himself to his present surroundings and heard Esther's gentle voice speaking—and speaking as usual in defence of some one's feelings. She was afraid that Eleanor's careless words might unwittingly hurt her sonless mother. "I think you are too hard on the women who have no sons, Eleanor; according to you they influence nobody, and I am sure that is not correct."

"Yes, they do; they influence their daughters, and through their daughters their grandsons. The women who never really influence anybody are the women who have no children. And a great comfort it must be to them! I'm sure I often envy the unmarried women and the married women with no children when I realize how little harm they are capable of doing in the world!"

Lady Westerham once more gently reproved her elder daughter. "But that does not relieve them of responsibility, my love. Remember the parable of the man with only one talent, who went and hid it in the earth."

"But, you see, Mamma," retorted the irrepressible Duchess, "they can't go and hide their children in the earth if they haven't got any to hide: that's just my point. I admit that to bury a child in the earth simply because it is an only child, is no excuse at all; but to refrain from worrying about your sons' education because you haven't got any sons, seems to me a most excellent reason for taking things easy. And I repeat, I envy the people who have got it."

"Oh, Eleanor, what a story!" exclaimed Esther. "You know you don't envy anybody who isn't the mother of Jocko and Archie."

"That is so: I own the soft impeachment. And I'll go further still—I always do things handsomely, you'll notice—and admit that I don't envy anybody who isn't married to Tammy, although his mother did bring him up so shockingly, and planted such stiff and formal perennials in the fertile soil of his youthful heart. But we've wandered away from the baby's education—which is really the primary matter at present, and the thing which Westerham came up here to talk about, and about which I was giving him some very good advice. Where was I? Does anybody remember?"

"I do," replied Westerham, with a smile; "you had just advised me not to send him to Eton because it is too modern and newfangled."

"Oh! yes, I remember now. I was saying, whatever you do, don't bring him up upon the modern system that he must never be made to do anything he doesn't like. It's a pretty enough system in theory, but it won't wash. He'll have to do things he doesn't like some time or other; and it will be a nuisance, when that time comes, if he doesn't know how!"

"*We* weren't trained in the modern way," murmured Esther.

"Of course we weren't," replied her sister, "and see how well we've turned out! But nowadays all the young people—boys and girls together—are brought up on this absurd plan. And when young people who have never been taught to do anything that they don't like, grow up and get married and try to set up house-keeping together, there has to be a modification of the divorce-laws. The one thing is simply the outcome of the other."

"All this modern talk about divorce is very dis-

gressing to me," remarked the Countess Dowager. "In my young days such a word was never mentioned. I consider it is a thing which should never be even thought about—much less talked about."

"And you are quite right, Mamma," agreed the Duchess. "I am with you to a man. I don't think I am narrow or stuck up, but I will not have anything to do with people who are sketchy about their marriage arrangements. I simply decline to have them inside my house. An artist person was giving me a lecture about this the other day, and saying how old-fashioned and hidebound I was to make such a fetish of the marriage superstition; and I said to him, 'What is sauce for one goose is sauce for another: if these people have the right to revise the Ten Commandments, I have the right to revise my own visiting list!' There was no answer to that: or, at any rate, he didn't invent one."

"I'll try not to spoil my son," said Lord Westerham meekly; "or eventually to render the present marriage laws insupportable to his wife."

"Oh! spoiling won't hurt him," replied the Duchess, "if it's properly done. It won't hurt him to do what he likes as a rule, provided that he has learnt to do what he doesn't like when it is necessary. But he needn't be always at it. You'll teach him to swim, I suppose, in case he is ever in a shipwreck; but that doesn't mean that you'll bring him up in an aquarium instead of in a nursery. There's a difference between knowing how to do an unpleasant thing and always doing it—the same difference as between standing in the emergency exit and sitting in the stalls."

"I think the modern tendency is to avoid the emergency exit altogether, figuratively speaking," said

Westerham. "Not only not to do the unpleasant thing, but not even to be able to do it."

"While the last generation not only learnt how to do the unpleasant thing," added the Duchess, "but got into the habit of always doing it. What I say is, strike the happy mean: train your boy to sit in the stalls, but to know how to use the emergency exit if necessary. Esther and I were brought up on the old system of training the young; and there's only one worse system than that, and that's the modern one! I'm thankful to say I've broken loose from my past, and learnt to enjoy the stalls in comfort; but Esther still persists in looking at the drama of life from the emergency exit, and in leaving the theatre by way of the fire-escape."

"Well, I'll try and strike the happy mean, Duchess, if you and Esther will help me." It was noteworthy that Westerham did not add his wife's name to the list of the assistant mistresses who were to preside over his son's education—even in thought.

Esther's face lit up with joy. "I shall love to help you, Wilfred," she said softly.

"And I'll give you a helping hand—or, to speak more correctly, a helping tongue—now and then," added the Duchess. "Make a man of him—a good man, Westerham; and if you do that, you can leave all the other things to take care of themselves. But don't let him think that if he is good he need necessarily be mawkish: in putting off the old man, there is no necessity to put on the old woman! And as he gets older, let him learn his own limitations. I always think that to know you can't do a thing, is almost as clever as knowing how to do it. You can take my advice or leave it alone, just as you like.

I am giving it for my own pleasure—not for yours ! ”

And so her Grace continued to lay down the law, for her cousin to take up or let alone as he liked, until her motor was announced.

While Lord Winfieldale was being discussed in the drawing-room at the Dower House, he was likewise an absorbing subject of conversation in the house-keeper's room : as a matter of fact, since his lordship's advent upon this mortal scene, Mrs. Brown and Perkins had talked of nothing else. His baby fingers had already stirred up the fine old feudal instincts lying dormant in their loyal breasts, and to them he was already the head of "The Family" which it was their privilege to serve—the embodiment of a system which to them had become a religion. He had already displaced "the Captain" in Perkins's faithful heart, and had finally purged from the soul of Mrs. Brown the vicarious shame of her beloved mistress's failure to provide an heir to the title and estates of Westerham. The two ladies' maids—having learnt from the present Countess's maid the fact of her ladyship's indifference towards her baby—were inclined to sit in judgment upon the unnatural mother ; but to the two elder retainers the fact that Lady Westerham had so speedily and effectively removed the fear that the name and the family might eventually die out, completely exonerated her from any blame which might attach to her lack of sentiment and emotion. She had provided an heir to carry on the line of Wyvern : that was all they cared about ; her attitude towards that heir was a very negligible quantity, as far as Mrs. Brown and Perkins were concerned.

"I cannot help wishing, when all's said and done," remarked the sentimental Clark, "that his lordship

had married Lady Esther, and that the baby had been hers. She'd have made such a beautiful mother, would her ladyship: so loving and tender!"

Perkins looked anxiously towards Mrs. Brown. He knew exactly the line of thought that she would follow, and devoutly hoped—for the sake of what he called "the young ladies"—that she would follow it in silence.

His hope was only partially realized. "That is as may be," was Mrs. Brown's cryptic reply. "Even if his lordship had married Lady Esther, it doesn't follow that there'd have been a baby. When you've lived as long as I have, Miss Clark, you'll learn to take things as they come, feeling thankful that they are no worse."

This was exactly what Perkins was feeling with regard to the conversation. "And after all," he hastened to add, "I don't think Lady Esther is altogether cut out for matrimony. She seems too good and holy for it, somehow: more like *John Dark* and *Saint Catherine of Senna*, and religious ladies of that kind, if you understand me."

"They were papists, weren't they, Mr. Perkins?" sneered Parker, scenting a certain amount of masculine laxity in the good man's opinions. Parker never erred on the side of tolerance.

"They were, Miss Parker; they were; but very religious ladies all the same," replied Perkins, quite unconscious of any humour in his use of the word *but*.

"And why was she called *Saint Catherine of Senna*?" inquired Clark, whose innocent soul was always athirst for information—especially when supplied by the stronger sex.

Like all men of middle age, Perkins could not resist

the pleasure of imparting information, even when he did not possess it. "Her particular form of penance, I presume : Roman Catholics have strange notions of what is pleasing to the Almighty ! Horshair shirts, and peas in their shoes, and goodness knows what other uncomfortable habits ! I've often heard his late lordship describe them at missionary meetings. He didn't hold with such self-denial, didn't his late lordship !"

"But his late lordship was very self-denying, too, in his own way," said Mrs. Brown, fearful lest Perkins's somewhat unguarded remarks should in any way militate against the infallibility of "The Family" in the minds of the two ladies' maids ; "very self-denying indeed ; but it was a sensible, Protestant sort of self-denial, that the Almighty or anybody else could understand. Why, he would never allow the young ladies to go to balls or to theatres until they were ever so old ; and he wouldn't have a card in the house, however much the young visitors wanted to play." The housekeeper spoke in all good faith : her irony was entirely unconscious—and, moreover, entirely unperceived.

"I shall look forward to teaching the young lord to play cricket," said Perkins, with the pathetic optimism of advanced middle age ; "and I shan't be so strict as I was in Master Algy's time in scolding the footmen for bowling when they ought to be answering the bell," he added, with the mellowed indulgence of the same period. "Eh ! but he was a fine batsman, was Master Algy—or, as I should say, 'the Captain' : a very fine batsman !"

"It was sad for him to die so young and so handsome," sighed Clark.

"It was indeed, Miss Clark," replied Perkins, sigh-

ing in unison. "Cut off in his prime, as you might say, by a piece of barbed wire which never ought to have been there."

"Well, perhaps it was all for the best, as the ways of Providence so often turn out to be," said Mrs. Brown more cheerfully; "it's no use crying over spilt milk—no use whatsoever. And nobody knows how much trouble that young gentleman has been spared—and his wife, too, seeing that he died unmarried. And if he'd have lived, we should never have had the sweet little precious up at the Hall as Lord Winfieldale, so doubtless it's all for the best."

"You seem set on that child, Mrs. Brown," remarked Parker. "I never knew you were such a one for children."

"Well, Miss Parker, I don't know that I am, not in a general way, there being children and children. But, of course, him being of 'The Family' makes all the difference. I'm sure I'm never tired of seeing him asleep in his cot, looking like the little aristocratic angel that he is."

"We shall have Mrs. Brown applying for the post of his lordship's nurse if we don't take care," said Perkins genially.

The ladies duly paid the tribute of a giggle to this playful humour. "If I do, I'll engage you as nursemaid, Mr. Perkins, for I'm sure you are every bit as much set on his dear little lordship as I am!" retorted the housekeeper.

"Well, well, Mrs. Brown, I'll keep it in mind, and if ever I'm dismissed from being her ladyship's butler, I'll take a nursemaid's place under you as a *dinner resort*."

And with a merry laugh at Perkins's sally the quartette broke up.

CHAPTER V

DRIFTING

THE next year or two passed swiftly and (on the surface) smoothly, with no particular happenings to act as fingerposts to show the travellers on what road they were travelling, and how far they had progressed. During the uneventful periods of life there is nothing to tell us the name of the way which we are treading, nor the goal to which it will eventually lead; but now and again something occurs which—like an outstretched signpost—suddenly shows us unwary wayfarers that we unwittingly left the highway to Zion some time ago, and are now speeding towards some very different and highly undesirable bourne. We thought we were getting along splendidly, with nothing to mar our comfort or interfere with our progress: and so we were; but it was along the way that leadeth to destruction, and the end whereof is death. We did not turn from the right road intentionally—or even consciously: we cannot even remember the point of divergence; we fondly imagined that we were still going along the road on which we started. But suddenly we come across a fingerpost—some unsuspected event happens which shows us clearly where we are—and we are dumbfounded at what we learn. Then there is nothing for us but to retrace our steps until we come back again to the King's highway; and the further we have travelled along the wrong

road, the harder and more difficult will that retracing prove.

During this period of apparent inaction, young Lady Westerham had pursued her course of pleasure unchecked. Her health was perfect; her beauty, if possible, more dazzling than it had been before. And because she was well and happy—and particularly because she was not in love with her husband—that husband found her extremely easy to live with. It is one of the ironies of life that strong feeling frequently interferes with agreeable intercourse. The more we care, the less we can connive: the more we mind about things, the less we can manage them. It is likewise one of the compensations of life that toleration is in inverse proportion to devotion. The less we love people, the less we expect of them, and the less we care when they fall short of our expectations—which is, after all, only another rendering of the truth that of those to whom little is given, little shall be required.

Therefore Beryl proved a most easy wife to Lord Westerham. She never interfered with his pleasures, because she never felt the slightest interest in them; she never attempted to curtail his liberty, because she did not care in the least where he went or what he did; and she made no demands whatsoever upon his affection, because she did not want to be bothered with his affection at all. The less she saw of him the better she was pleased; but when she did see him, she bore in mind how much she owed to him, and how much he had added to her enjoyment of life, and she was accordingly grateful and pleasant. In spite of the admiration which she could not avoid exciting, Beryl never flirted—not because she loved Wilfred more, but other men less. As long as these others admired her from a distance she was well content with their admiration;

but the minute they showed signs of any warmer feeling she became horribly bored. Love was a thing for which she had no use: it simply tired her. To the eyes of the world she was a model wife; and so she really was, in the letter. It was only in the spirit that she fell so far short of ideal wifehood.

And to the eyes of the world Beryl was also a model mother. She sent for her baby—when she remembered him—down to the drawing-room, and showed him off to anybody who cared to see him, making an exquisite picture with him in her arms: and her friends all said of her what a sensible mother she was in never boring other people by talking about her child—which most certainly she never did!

Her husband was perhaps quieter than he used to be, and less full of ideas and theories. But he was what the world counted a happy man, and he certainly had every obvious reason for contentment.

These two years had dealt very lightly with Cecilia, Lady Westerham. She had come to that restful time of life when her world consisted of her family and her garden, and when the peace of God lay all around her in the fading light of her eventide. She had known joy and sorrow in her time; but now the toils and the pleasures of her day were over, and she was patiently awaiting the coming of that short night which should herald the dawn of the everlasting morning.

The Duchess, too, was much the same as she had been two years ago: just as merry and just as sensible; but with perhaps a shade more of tenderness in her mirth, and a touch more of sentiment in her common-sense.

Lady Esther alone had changed—or, rather, Lady Esther and Lord Winfieldale. The latter had developed from a wizened and wrinkled baby into the most

lovely child imaginable, with his mother's beauty and the promise of his father's brains: and Esther had blossomed into an ideal of vicarious motherhood. As far as she was concerned, little Win had altered the whole complexion of life. As Wilfred had awakened the woman in her, so Wilfred's son had awakened the mother in her; and she found the latter passion as absorbing as she had found the former. Only with this difference: that while, in the one instance, her conscience had bidden her stand on one side in order that Beryl might seize the happiness that might have been hers, so, in the other, that same conscience urged her to seize upon and fulfil the duty that Beryl so disgracefully neglected and ignored.

In the interests of both the child's health and his mother's pleasure, it was found best for the boy to spend most of his time at Wyvern's End, whilst Lord and Lady Westerham were in London, or abroad, or staying with their many friends and acquaintances; and Lady Esther loved him and looked after him and watched over him to her heart's content, assisted by his devoted "Nannie." It was Esther who guided his wavering footsteps when first he essayed to toddle; it was Esther who instructed him in his earliest attempts at rational conversation. In return for her adoration, he gave her the warmest affection of his baby heart: and surely there is nothing so delicately flattering to the best side of our natures—nothing so completely gratifying to our noblest and purest self-respect—as the love of a little child. So Esther, for the first time in her life, was peacefully and profoundly content. She had found her place in the world, and had filled it: and what woman can ask more of life than that?

Not only did she derive absolute happiness from

the constant companionship of Wilfred's son—she also incidentally experienced a considerable amount of pleasure from the society of Wilfred's self; for Lord Westerham frequently ran down to Wyvern's End for a few days to see the child whom he adored, and with whom his beautiful young wife could not be bothered.

Esther found Wilfred's friendship more satisfying than she had ever found his love: his comradeship was far more to her taste than his caresses. Perhaps it was a question of age—it certainly was a question of temperament—but the ecstasy of passion had not, so to speak, suited Lady Esther. She had found it too exciting, too overpowering: even before her conscience began meddling in the matter at all, her love-affair had proved too exhausting for her. It intoxicated her with bliss, but it never made her really happy.

But this present state of things made her happy beyond all expression. To see Wilfred frequently—to enjoy the intellectual side of his character—to share in his interests and to be supported by his sympathy—above all, to feel that in her devotion to his child she was serving him and helping him to the utmost of her power—these things filled her cup to overflowing.

The absolutely unselfish nature never blossoms fully in the heat of passion; for passion in its very essence is a selfish thing. It would not be true to itself if it were not. What man or woman would like to feel that they had been sought in marriage from unselfish motives? The best lovers must always have a strong strain of self in them: otherwise their love is lacking in its essential quality. But in every other relation of life—and most especially in the maternal relation

—unselfishness is a perfect and a precious thing. Therefore absolutely selfless women, such as Esther Wyvern, are far happier in family life than in the ecstasies of love-making. They have their romance, it is true—plenty of it; but it is a mystical exaltation, more suited to the realms of dreamland than to the exigencies of the ordinary love-affair. Thus in her devotion to Winfieldale, Esther's nature attained its highest development: and its fulfilment was hardly less perfect in her absolutely pure and unselfish friendship for Winfieldale's father.

It was when the boy was about two years old that Lord Westerham received one morning a somewhat disquieting letter from Lady Esther, and communicated its contents to his wife. Unlike most women of fashion, Beryl never breakfasted in her own room. Her splendid health and abundant energy rebelled against a custom which savoured, if not of invalidism, at any rate of indolence. So she always had breakfast downstairs with her husband, thereby adding another item to her list of qualifications as a model wife. That she did it to please herself and not to please her husband, was a fact of no moment in a world where actions are measured according to their results and not according to their motives. In that other world, where attempt counts for more than attainment, and where deserts are regulated by desires rather than by deeds, young Lady Westerham's account was perhaps not so satisfactory. We are all compelled to go in for the principle of "Double Entry" in Life's account-book: and it is a disquieting thought that when the final day of reckoning arrives, we shall find that earth's cash-book and heaven's ledger rarely tally.

"Esther says that Win is not well," said Westerham, tossing Esther's letter to his wife; "his throat

has been sore for days, and Taylor can't understand why it doesn't yield to remedies."

Lady Westerham skimmed the letter in her graceful, careless way. "Oh, I don't expect there is much the matter!" she said when she had finished; "children are often seedy with trifling ailments, and Cousin Esther is always absurdly fussy about Winfieldale."

But her ladyship's cheering words did not dispel the cloud on her husband's brow. "And the boy has a temperature, too, you see, which Taylor can't get down to normal."

Beryl shrugged her shoulders. "That's nothing! Children are always having temperatures. They are often over a hundred at night, and then down to normal again in the morning."

"But I gather from Esther's letter that both she and the doctor are anxious."

"Then it is very silly of them! But Esther is getting an awfully stuffy old maid, and Dr. Taylor isn't much better. And they really are absurd about that child! Every time the poor little beggar sneezes they hold a consultation over him, and talk about him until, in their imagination, the sneeze has assumed the dimensions of an earthquake." Beryl had long ago ceased to cherish any scruples about criticizing Esther.

"And you see," said Lord Westerham, with a catch in his breath that showed how he hated to put the thing into words, although experience had taught him that unless a thing was put into words his wife was incapable of perceiving it, "they say there are cases of diphtheria in the village."

"That would only be among the poor people, and I'm sure Nannie would have the sense never to take Win into any of the cottages—though Esther might. Cousin Esther is so fond of visiting the poor, and I

think it is such a foolish habit, as they are generally infectious; and if they aren't infectious they're sure to be dirty."

"I am sure that Esther would never take Win anywhere that there was the least fear of infection," replied Wilfred, with the stern expression that any criticisms of Esther always brought to his face. "Esther is an extremely sensible woman, and in addition to that she is simply wrapped up in the boy."

Beryl smiled good-humouredly. "I know all that: and that is why I feel quite sure you needn't worry about the diphtheria. Charitable as Cousin Esther is, her charity only begins where Winfieldale's comfort leaves off. You may bet your last shilling on that!"

"Don't you think you could run down with me in the car this morning, and let us see for ourselves how the boy is? We should get back again in time for dinner." Westerham made the proposition somewhat timidly.

"Certainly not. What a ridiculous suggestion! Why, I've got to go to the dressmaker's this morning, and then I'm due at a luncheon, and a bridge-party after that. I couldn't possibly motor down to Wyvern's End and back to-day. It is out of the question."

There was a pathetic look in Lord Westerham's eyes—a look that one sees sometimes in the eyes of a dog when the creature is trying, in its dumb way, to mitigate the omnipotence of its master. "Couldn't you put off your engagements just this once? It would only be the dressmaker and luncheon and the bridge-party. We shall be back in plenty of time for the Silverhamptons' dinner and Lady Kesterton's ball afterwards."

Beryl smiled at him good-humouredly. "No, Westerham, I couldn't possibly put off anything : and there is no earthly reason why I should. If old Taylor isn't competent to prescribe a gargle for Win, let him send for a doctor from town who is ! "

"Oh, Beryl, please come with me—just this once ! Just to please me, and to set our minds at rest."

Beryl's pleasantness was still unruffled. One of her most marked qualifications as a model wife was her imperturbably good temper. "I can set our minds at rest all right, without motoring seventy miles for the purpose," she replied, with a laugh ; "mine is at rest already. You may take my word for it that there's nothing much the matter with Win."

"But I can't take your word for it, Beryl, until we have seen the child ! If, after we have seen him and interviewed Taylor, you can give me your word there's nothing much the matter with the boy, then you'll set my mind at rest."

Lady Westerham once more shrugged her shoulders. "Then your mind won't be set at rest at all : you'll have to put up with it as it is."

"Won't you come, Beryl ? If you won't come for the boy's sake, won't you because I ask you ? I so rarely ask you to do anything for me ! " There was an appeal in Lord Westerham's eyes and a tremor in his voice that would have touched the heart of ninety-nine women out of a hundred. But his wife happened to be the hundredth.

"And a very good thing you don't, Westerham, if they are such absurd and tiresome things as this ! " she retorted, with her rippling laugh. "Surely Esther and Nannie and old Taylor are competent to concoct a gargle or to administer a lozenge between them ! And if they aren't, let them get some big-wig down

from town to do so. I'm sure I shan't grudge the money, if it is any satisfaction to you." It did not occur to her ladyship that it was her husband's money that she did not grudge; nor—to do him justice—did it occur to Westerham.

"Then if you can't go, I must go by myself," he said, getting up from the table to ring the bell.

Beryl raised her pencilled eyebrows. "But I thought you said you had a committee on at the House of Lords to-day?"

"So I have; but that and everything else must give way to the boy," replied Westerham. Then to the footman who had answered the bell, he said: "Tell them to bring round the big touring-car at once. I am going down to Wyvern's End."

"But I thought you said it was a very important committee—one that you were particularly interested in," persisted Beryl, as the footman withdrew.

"So it is. But I must give it up, even if you won't give up your dressmaker and your parties!" Westerham tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice, but failed. Not that it mattered, however, for the bitterness was utterly lost upon Beryl. She never saw what she did not wish to see, her "inward eye" being thus comfortably constituted.

"Well, I can't possibly give up those, as I have told you," she repeated, with unruffled good humour. "And if you aren't back in time I shall go on to the Silverhamptons' without you," she added, as Westerham rose from the table and walked towards the door.

He stopped suddenly as if he had been shot. "Do you mean to say that you won't stay to hear how the boy is?" he asked, wheeling round and staring at her in amazement.

But she did not even look at him as she carelessly

answered, "Of course not; why should I? You know how it always annoys Lord Silverhampton if people come late to his dinners; and I don't see why I should spoil his temper and Lady Silverhampton's dinner because you and Cousin Esther happen to be a couple of old maids."

Without another word Lord Westerham turned on his heel and strode out of the room. But he banged the door after him.

CHAPTER VI

ANXIETY

WHEN Westerham arrived at Wyvern's End, he found Esther already there, and found her in a very anxious state of mind. The doctor had been and had pronounced the case to be diphtheria, and, moreover, a very sharp attack. He had administered anti-toxin and was doing everything he could; and Esther had already telegraphed to the London hospital for two nurses to assist herself and Nannie in looking after the little invalid. She had established herself and her maid at Wyvern's End, so as to be on the spot the whole time; and the Dowager Countess had willingly spared her daughter for such a cause.

When Wilfred suggested to Esther the danger of infection to which she was thus exposing herself, she simply laughed him to scorn. And he knew as well as she did that no thought of possible danger could ever separate her from the little child whom she loved so devotedly.

They neither of them mentioned Beryl's name at all. Westerham was one of the many men, and Esther was one of the few women, who can hold their tongues when necessary; and life had taught them both the lesson that there are many things which are intolerable only when put into words.

They spent an unhappy day together, each trying to buoy up the other with the expression of hopes that neither of them really felt; and speaking words of

comfort that both the speaker and the hearer knew to be false, yet were grateful to the other for uttering. Now and again they attempted to talk about other things—the things that were generally so full of interest for them both; but underneath the talk they were conscious of that dull ache of anxiety which pegs steadily on and takes the flavour out of everything.

The nurses arrived and were installed, and Lord Westerham duly interviewed the doctor, giving him a free hand to call in a second opinion the very first moment he considered a second opinion advisable: and finally his lordship left Wyvern's End, feeling that, with Lady Esther in possession, the sick child would lack nothing.

When he got back to town he found Beryl resting in her boudoir preparatory to dressing for the dinner-party and subsequent ball; and his sore heart went out to her in a longing for that comfort which no one but a man's wife can bestow—that equal bearing of each other's burden and equal sharing of each other's cross which is only possible between two who are really one. But as he approached her with outstretched arms, the cautious Beryl waived him aside.

"Did you find Win with diphtheria after all," she asked; "or was it, as I expected, one of Cousin Esther's false alarms?"

"They are afraid it is diphtheria," Westerham replied, in an unnecessary attempt to break the bad news gently; "but Taylor hopes it will soon yield to treatment."

"Did you see the child?"

"Of course I did, poor little chap! He looks awfully seedy." And Wilfred's eyes grew moist at the memory of his darling's sufferings.

"How very foolish of you, Westerham, when you

know as well as I do what a dreadfully infectious thing diphtheria is! I wonder you hadn't more sense."

"But, Beryl, I couldn't know the boy was ill and keep away from him," pleaded Westerham.

"Why not? I could, and I'm the boy's mother! I think it was most wrong and foolish of you, and most inconsiderate towards me. You might give me diphtheria! Well, at any rate, don't come near me or kiss me, for goodness' sake: and I think you'd better order the single brougham to take you to the Silverhamptons', as I should be afraid of being boxed up with you in the closed car after you've exposed yourself to infection."

Westerham was too unhappy to be angry; he only felt dead tired. "Very well, just as you like," he answered listlessly, as he went out of the room and closed the door behind him.

As long as he lived he felt he could never forget that evening, and all the horror of Lady Silverhampton's dinner and Lady Kesterton's ball. And he also felt that he could never forgive their ladyships for having given such parties, although—as a matter of fact—they were very nice parties indeed. But Lord Westerham most unjustly hated both the hostesses for years afterwards, as we are all prone to hate those unwitting persons who are unconsciously associated with our bitterest hours of sorrow or pain. Both the dinner and the ball were excellent, the dresses gorgeous, the company brilliant: Beryl looked absolutely lovely in a diaphanous sea-green gown, with her diamond tiara on her golden hair: and the admiration she obviously excited was enough to turn the head of any husband. Yet all the time he kept saying to himself, "And she never once asked how the poor little chap really is!"

Then followed a terribly anxious time both for Lord Westerham and for Esther. Although every known remedy had been applied, and the best opinions had down from London, little Lord Winfieldale did not get on as well as he ought to have done. In the first place, it was a very serious attack; and in the second, he was a very young child, and the conjunction of untoward circumstances threatened to prove too much for him.

Esther stayed on at Wyvern's End, taking all the reins of household government into her own capable hands; and Westerham ran down from town every day. As a matter of fact, there was nothing that he could do for the boy, who was perfectly happy with Esther and his Nannie; and he could not very well stay on at Wyvern's End with Esther, unless Beryl were there too. This Beryl absolutely refused to be, as nothing would convince her that the boy's life was really in danger. She was one of those superbly obstinate women whom it is impossible to convince against their will.

Every day Esther walked across the park to the Dower House, nominally for the sake of fresh air and exercise, but also in order to assuage her anguish of anxiety at that fountain-head of comfort which has no equal in this world, and no superior in the next; for even the Divine Comforter could find no more perfect simile for His own ineffable consolations than "as one whom his mother comforteth even so will I comfort you."

On one of her daily calls at the Dower House, Esther found her sister sitting with the Dowager, the Duchess having run down from town to pay one of her frequent visits to her beloved mother. The women of the Victorian era excelled in some relations of life, and

fell short in others: but there is no doubt that as daughters they left nothing to be desired. With them filial piety was developed into a fine art.

"Oh! Eleanor, are you afraid of me on account of any infection I might carry?" asked Esther, stopping still on the threshold of her mother's morning-room as soon as she saw that her mother was not alone. "Because, if so, I'll come and see Mamma later in the day."

"Afraid of you, my dear girl? What nonsense!" replied the Duchess. "Come in at once, and sit down, and make yourself at home in your own house. There are compensations even in advancing years, as I am discovering. As one grows old, one is distinguished by more sense and less liability to infection."

"It is very nice to hear you talking nonsense again, Eleanor," said Esther, with a smile, sitting down on an easy chair at a safe distance from the other two. "I have been in such an anxious atmosphere lately that it is delightful to meet a cheerful, irresponsible person again."

"And how is the dear child this morning?" asked Lady Westerham.

Esther's smile faded away. "Not quite so well: we are terribly worried about him. Wilfred has sent for the London man to come and see him again."

"Has Beryl been down yet?" asked Eleanor abruptly.

Esther replied in the negative.

Lady Westerham, seeing the displeasure on her elder daughter's brow, hastened to find excuses for the culprit. "You see, Eleanor, Beryl is so terrified of infection. You must take that into consideration before you judge her too harshly."

"I shall take nothing into consideration, Mamma:

nothing at all. And as for judging her too harshly, it would be impossible to do so."

Esther said nothing, as was her way when she had nothing kind to say.

"I wish Beryl could hear what people are saying about her," continued the Duchess; "but then, unfortunately, people never do hear what other people are saying about them; the world would be a much better place if they did!"

Lady Westerham still endeavoured to make excuses for her favourite. "But after all, Beryl is so young: not much more than a child herself. And so very, very beautiful that one cannot be very hard upon her."

But the Duchess refused to be mollified. "I can, Mamma; as hard as nails! And she isn't so infantile as all that. Five-and-twenty if she is a day. The fact is, she is a nasty, shallow, selfish little wretch: and I always told you so, but you and Esther wouldn't believe me. I own she is good-looking—for people who admire that empty, yellow-haired type—but when you get below her good looks, there's nothing else. She is like those balloons which the boys used to be so fond of when they were little, and which broke their hearts by bursting and becoming nothing but dirty bits of rag. Prick the bubble of Beryl's beauty, and she is nothing but a dirty bit of rag."

"Still, all our righteousness is only filthy rags, when you come to that," retorted Esther, with a smile.

"But there are degrees of filth," argued her sister: "ours are nothing like so filthy as Beryl's."

"It is not for us to say that, my love," said her mother in gentle reproof; "we must all beware of self-righteousness."

"I do beware of it; but there's nothing self-righteous

in thinking I'm a better woman than that despicable little idiot. If I wasn't, I'd go into a nunnery or a penitentiary until I was! She is absolutely below normal!"

And in spite of all her mother's endeavours to whitewash the culprit, Eleanor continued to abuse Beryl until the end of her visit.

The following day Westerham entered his wife's boudoir with a white and anguished face. "Esther has telegraphed that the boy is very much worse," he said; "I am going down at once, and you must come with me."

Beryl looked up from her letter-writing. "I am so sorry that Win is worse; but I don't see what good my going there would do. I don't really. And I'm sure if he is worse to-day he'll be better again to-morrow. You really needn't worry about him like this."

"It is your duty. You are the child's mother."

"Of course, if I could do any good I'd go at once," said Beryl amiably: "but I can't. I'm an awfully bad nurse, as you know, and I never have an idea what to do in a sick-room."

"You are the boy's mother," repeated Lord Westerham.

"I know I am; but all the same, he isn't really fond of me—not as he is of Cousin Esther or Nannie. It wouldn't make him a bit happier if I went, because I never can talk to him or play with him; and it is a great mistake to have too many people in a sick-room."

"Play with him!" repeated Westerham bitterly: "that is all you think of—play, play, play from morning till night! But you won't be asked to play with Win; he is past that, poor little chap!"

"Don't be cross, Westerham," said Beryl, with a bewitching pout, "it isn't nice or pretty of you! If I really believed that Win was dangerously ill, I should be as wretched as you are, but I don't."

But her husband—like her son—was past playing with. "Will you come or will you not?" he asked sternly; "the car will be round in a few minutes."

"I can't come, Westerham: I've told you I can't. I should do no good to the child, and I might do myself harm. I should be sure to catch diphtheria if I went, and I should probably excite the boy and make him worse."

"Esther has not caught it, and she has been with Win day and night."

Lady Westerham shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, Esther is old, and old people never catch things! There is no risk for her at her age, as there would be for me at mine."

"Are you coming or are you not? Have you no mother's instinct in you that forces you to go to your dying baby?"

"For mercy's sake don't be melodramatic, Westerham! It does not suit you. I feel sure that Winfieldale isn't dying: if he were, of course I should come. But it would do nobody any good if I ran into infection and got ill too. It would only make things worse for you than even they are now." There was an expression on Lady Westerham's lovely face that her husband had learnt to understand: an expression of unmoved and immovable obstinacy. When she looked like that, he knew that argument and entreaty were alike useless.

Still he tried the last shot in his marital locker. "Suppose, as your husband, I command you to come with me?"

At that Beryl fairly laughed. "Oh, Westerham, how absurd! A husband who commands is indeed an out-of-date monstrosity. If you did that, I should send you to the South Kensington Natural History Museum, to be exhibited in the same case as the remains of mammoths and megatheriums and other extinct animals."

Westerham went out of the room without speaking. He could not trust himself to answer. It was so hopeless to try to change Beryl's opinion when once she had made up her mind. She would have come fast enough if she had believed in Win's danger: her husband knew that; but he also knew that she did not believe in it, and that nothing on earth would make her believe in it short of the child's death.

Then followed a fearful twenty-four hours for the watchers round the sick child's bed. Sometimes it seemed as if Life were winning the victory—sometimes as if Death had already won. All that day and all the following night Esther never left the room, as hour after hour passed; and hers was the only voice and hers the only hand that could still the ravings of the pitiful, childish delirium. Little Win needed her as no one had ever needed her before: and to his service she gave herself freely, with no thought of self. Had she thought of herself, her agony would have been more than she could bear; the idea of life without the child was more than she could face even in imagination. She did not weep; there would be time for weeping after he was gone, she felt—all the rest of her life; perhaps another thirty or forty desolate and un comforted years; but as long as his dear little form was present with her, she gave herself body and soul to him, sparing neither her strength nor her

care in ministering to his comforts and fighting his battle.

Westerham was with her most of the time, but she never gave a thought to him. The whole of her love and care and attention were reserved for the baby, who had changed the world for her, and who now seemed about to leave her alone again.

And all that dreadful time she prayed as she had never prayed before: an unceasing and wordless cry went up from her soul to Him Who holds the worlds in the hollow of His Hand, and yet took little children in His Arms and blessed them. And gradually a deep peace fell upon her tortured heart—that peace of God which passeth all understanding, and which is only known to those souls who are in direct communion with Him. She felt the mystical Personal Touch which comes to most of us when we are ready to receive it, and which transfigures life, and takes the sting from death, and makes all things new. As she knelt by the baby's cot, she felt there was One standing beside her Who knew all that she was suffering, and in Whose keeping both she and the child were safe for evermore. The horror of thick darkness suddenly fell away from her, and she realized that what men call the shadow of death is only the shadow of His Arms stretched out to receive His own. Suddenly all her resistance was over—all her passionate struggle to save her darling's life from the enemy who fought for it—for it was revealed to her, as it was to Jacob, Who it was with Whom she wrestled until the breaking of the day, and against Whom she could not prevail. At His Touch, His Name was made known to her, and she fell at His Feet and worshipped Him, giving up the child into His keeping of her own free will.

And as she gave, her gift was given back to her; in her absolute submission she had power with God and prevailed. The Hand That had touched her touched the little sufferer also, and the fever left him, and he fell into a peaceful sleep.

And then Esther knew that in losing her life she had saved it—in giving up everything she had gained all things—and that now the child would not die, but live.

CHAPTER VII

A REVELATION

LITTLE Lord Winfieldale's convalescence was a time of great joy to Esther : of that joy which we feel after a happy issue out of all our afflictions, when the mere cessation of pain spells pleasure, and the removal of the rack means rest and ease. After a little while fresh cares and trials beset our path, and the clouds return after the rain : but just at first the reaction of averted sorrow is absolute and abounding gladness of heart.

When once he had taken the turn, and set his little face in the direction of recovery, Win's progress towards health was rapid and unhindered. With the glorious resilience of childhood, he threw off his many infirmities as if they were worn-out garments, and emerged from his illness as sound and whole as if it had never been.

It was also a period of great spiritual peace for Esther Wyvern. That moment of personal communion with her Master at what she believed to be Winfieldale's death-bed—that intimate sense of His actual Presence which almost touched the physical in its vivid sense of reality—had done more to sweep away her hard thoughts of His dealings with His servants than Westerham's arguments had ever done. She knew now—with a certainty far beyond all need of logical proof or theological demonstration—that her faith was founded not upon a fallible Church, but upon

an infallible Person : that the vital question was not what she felt about Christ, but what He felt about her. She realized the great truth that religion is not subjective, but objective : a truth which shone bright and clear in the early Church, but which centuries of morbid introspection and self-examination and self-discipline have somewhat dimmed and blurred. The mediæval monk knew the temptations of the flesh, and strove to stifle them by scourgings and fastings : the Puritan divine knew the snares of the world, and shut his eyes to the beauty of the world lest he should see the evil as well : the eighteenth century evangelical knew the wiles of the devil, and was so eager to uproot the tares out of his own heart that he sometimes pulled up some of the wheat also : but there was one greater than them all who was determined to know nothing save Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He had realized the objectiveness of Christianity.

Thus Esther Wyvern sojourned for awhile on the Delectable Mountains, called by some "Immanuel's Land," from whence pilgrims can now and again catch glimpses of the gates of the Celestial City : and for a time all was well with her. But it is written that "below the mountains there is a stile," from which goes "a path that leads directly to Doubting Castle, which is kept by Giant Despair." And what was true in John Bunyan's time is true to this present day.

The only drawback to Esther's perfect happiness was the fact that there seemed lately to have grown up an intangible barrier between herself and Lord Westerham. Their friendship had ceased to be the perfect and delightful thing that it had been before Win's illness. Esther could not understand it. She had certainly done all that any mortal woman could

have done for Wilfred and his son at that trying and anxious time : and even her gentle and unexacting spirit was hurt to find that what ought to have rivetted the bond of friendship between herself and Westerham had served rather to slacken it. There was nothing about which she could legitimately complain : he was still as courteous towards her, when they met, as he had ever been ; but she could not but be conscious of the fact that he came down to see her much less frequently than he used to do, and was much more distraught and reserved with her than he used to be.

Esther was not one of those tiresome and exacting women who are always doubting the affection of their friends, and requiring assurance of their own loveliness ; but she could not help seeing that Westerham had ceased to derive from her companionship that obvious pleasure which it afforded him only a comparatively short time ago.

And this was not all.

After the doctors had been put upon their oaths by Beryl, and had assured her that she could now see her son without any danger of infection to herself, she consented to come—not to Wyvern's End itself—but to the Dower House for that interview with her child which her husband considered so desirable. So to her aunt's she came for a few days, accompanied by Lord Westerham ; and met little Win frequently in the park and the garden, as she still firmly declined to hold any intercourse with the boy save in the open air.

The anxiety which had scored fresh lines on Esther's brow and introduced the first silver threads into her light brown hair, had taken no such liberties with young Lady Westerham. This perhaps was hardly to be wondered at, considering that Beryl had absolutely declined to admit into her consciousness that

anxiety which had scorched Esther's very soul. But what was to be wondered at—and what the household at the Dower House did wonder at—was the fact that Beryl's heartlessness appeared to be compensated for, and more than compensated for, in her husband's eyes, by her wonderful beauty. Her treatment of the child, which might easily have estranged Lord Westerham, seemed rather to have endeared her to him : for never since the first days of his mad passion for her, had he devoted himself so entirely to her service as now. He waited upon her hand and foot ; he anticipated her slightest wish ; he let his thoughts as well as his eyes continually dwell upon every detail of her matchless loveliness : in short, he played the devout lover as he had not played it since his honeymoon.

And his wife, in return, was very charming to him. She had no compunction as to her behaviour during the time of Win's illness : were it all to come over again she would do exactly the same : nevertheless she realized that her conduct had been far from ideal to the unprejudiced eye, and she was grateful to Westerham for having so completely forgiven and forgotten it, especially as he had been so vexed with her at the time. She was nearly always pleasant and good-tempered, but now she made a special effort to attract and bewitch and enslave him afresh by a beauty which he had originally found so irresistible. Love was—and always would be—a sealed book to her ; but of adulation she never tired : and the admiration which she read in her husband's eyes, and which he so openly displayed in the sight of the world, filled her shallow soul with delight. To have her husband still intoxicated with her after three years of married life, was, she felt, a tremendous tribute to her charms ; and she appreciated it—and incidentally him—accordingly.

But if Beryl was pleased with Lord Westerham, other people were not. His behaviour aroused most severe comment in the housekeeper's room at the Dower House.

"I can't understand it," said Perkins in sorrow rather than in anger: "I can't understand it at all; but I'm sure his lordship is nothing like so fond of Lady Esther as he used to be. Just like brother and sister they were—it was a pleasure to see them together. But now they seem nothing at all to each other."

"I've noticed it, too," said Parker; "I passed the remark on it only the other day."

"And after what her ladyship did for him during his little lordship's illness and all!" added Clark, with tears in her soft blue eyes; "I call it most surprising."

"There must be something behind it," said Perkins: "some quarrel or misunderstanding. But I'm sure I don't know what there was on the *tapestry* for them to quarrel about."

"It's most surprising!" repeated Clark.

"Not at all, Miss Clark," said Mrs. Brown; "there's nothing surprising in what any man does; because if once you allowed yourself to be surprised at the queer things men do, you'd never be able to stop being surprised. I can tell you what's the reason why his lordship has got tired of Lady Esther," she added ominously.

"And what is it, Mrs. Brown?" pleaded the gentle Clark; "pray give it a name."

"The reason is that her ladyship isn't good-looking, and he's a man: that's what the reason is; and more shame to him!" replied the housekeeper, with rising anger.

"I don't see that good looks matter in friendship," argued Parker.

"They matter with men in everything; and nothing else matters at all. That's what men are like! I've been married and I know 'em, to my sorrow!"

"Come, come, Mrs. Brown," said Perkins, feeling that the time had arrived for him to stand up for his sex, "you are too hard on us as a whole. All gentlemen are not so susceptible to the charms of beauty. I remember that a highly educated friend of mine used to say that nothing would ever induce him to marry a good-looking woman, because a handsome wife meant the *maxim* of expense and the *millennium* of comfort. Those were his very words."

"French again, Mr. Perkins," was Clark's ingenuous tribute.

The butler beamed. "Not French this time, Miss Clark: Latin."

"Fancy!" gushed Clark. "What a wonderful knowledge of foreign languages you do have! I always think it makes a gentleman seem so wise and accomplished when he knows a lot of foreign languages."

"The fact is," remarked Parker, "that his lordship's so taken up with his wife that he has no eyes for Lady Esther nor for anybody else."

"Just because her ladyship is pretty, and Lady Esther is not. A man all over!" It would be impossible to reproduce in letterpress the scorn of Mrs. Brown's tone.

"And after all Lady Esther's goodness to Baby, and her ladyship's neglect of him! I call it downright hard-hearted and ungrateful!"

"Never expect gratitude from men, for you won't get it, Miss Clark," rejoined Mrs. Brown; "so the

sooner you leave off looking out for it the better. If a woman is good-looking, she can kill all a man's children and trample upon them, and he'll think none the worse of her for it; but she may spend her life in nursing them and looking after them, and doing all their washing at home, and he'll never so much as say 'thank you' to her if she's plain."

"Your remark reminds me of the story of a Greek lady," said Perkins, longing to display his literary prowess once more before Miss Clark's admiring eyes; "a very beautiful lady who killed all her children. Her name was Medea."

Mrs. Brown sniffed. "And her husband would 'me dear' her just the same, I'll be bound, if she was as beautiful as you say! He wouldn't mind how many children she killed, if she'd only got a pretty face. That's men all over!"

"Come, come, Mrs. Brown," repeated Perkins, feeling it a soothing and non-committal remark.

But Mrs. Brown absolutely refused to "come, come." "It was just the same with Brown," she continued; "I'm sure nobody could ha' done more than I did for his little boy by his first wife—nobody; though he was by no manner of means what you'd call an engaging child. All the time I nursed him through the measles—and very bad he had them, with chest complications thrown in—there was Brown carrying on with the second housemaid at the Hall, just because she'd got a pretty face. All my care of little Edwin counted for nothing, compared with a pair of blue eyes and a pink-and-white complexion!"

Perkins felt a certain amount of sympathy with the late Mr. Brown; but he also felt that this was not the occasion on which to express it. So all he said was, "Gentlemen may be foolish enough to carry on with a

pretty face, I admit; but when it comes to marrying, they want something more substantial and comfortable. For my part, if I married, what I should go in for would be a lady who would make my home happy and cosy, and all in beautiful order: everything *oh fate* and *on wriggle*, as the French have it."

"Well, you'll never get it with a pretty face, Mr. Perkins, never," replied Mrs. Brown; "the two don't go together, and never have done, as you can see yourself from the story of the Greek lady who was called 'me dear' because she was so good-looking."

"I'm not much one for pretty faces myself," the wary butler went on; "I go in for what you may call the *toot assembly* and general style. But even that don't count much in married life, if the lady don't make a man comfortable."

"It seems to count with his lordship," said Clark mournfully; "for I'm sure her present ladyship has nothing but her looks to recommend her."

"And there's no denying," added Parker, "that this illness of his little lordship has aged poor Lady Esther something terrible. She never had any looks to speak of, but she has lost the little she had."

"I can't gainsay you, Miss Parker, though it goes to my heart to admit it," said the faithful Clark; "but I'm hoping that as time goes on my lady will get over the anxiety and look a bit younger again."

"Folks don't go backwards at her ladyship's time of life, Miss Clark!" replied the uncompromising Parker; "more's the pity!"

The ideas which were so freely circulated in the housekeeper's room made their way—though in a more nebulous form—into Lady Esther's brain. As she looked in the glass and saw how the period of hard nursing and cruel anxiety through which she had just

passed had inscribed its superscription on her worn face and whitening hair, she could not fail dimly to connect this with Westerham's change of attitude towards her; and especially when she saw how the mere possession of beauty not only apparently blinded Wilfred to Beryl's lack of all the domestic virtues, but also induced the Dowager Countess to regard this lack far more leniently than she would otherwise have done.

Esther was no longer bitter because the all-important gift of beauty had been denied to her. In the olden days, when she had contrasted her lot with the lot of those others to whom beauty had been given, her feet had almost gone, her treadings had wellnigh slipt: she had felt that she had cleansed her heart in vain, and in vain had washed her hands in innocency; what availed it all, as long as she was not fair to look upon? And when she tried to understand this, she found it too painful for her. But since then, like the Psalmist of old, she had been into the sanctuary of God, and all doubt and bitterness had been washed out of her heart for ever. She knew that she had been foolish and ignorant; but He had guided her with His Counsel and would afterwards receive her into His Glory. Therefore, though her heart and flesh might fail, her soul was abundantly satisfied.

But though Esther was no longer embittered by what she considered the results of her lack of beauty, she was still human enough to be hurt by them; and Westerham's sudden defection cut her to the quick. And in addition to her pain at his apparent ingratitude, his conduct roused in her that old plea for justice at the hands of Man, which Woman has been offering, in different forms, all through the centuries, and which is a thing quite apart from Woman's longing for love, or from her lust for power. This instinct is not the

same as her desire to put her foot upon Man's neck, or to lie in the shelter of his arms : it may be co-existent with both of these desires, or unallied with either of them ; but it is the instinct which now and again—at different times and in divers places—impels her to plead her cause before Man, and to argue with him face to face ; to cry to him as his Maker once cried to him : “Gird up thy loins like a man ; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me ! ” In this mood she asks neither for his love nor for his pity : both of those he has given to her in full measure flowing over, and will so continue to give ; but, for the time being, she bids him look her square in the face, and mete out to her not kindness, not consideration, not equality, but justice ; the one and only thing which he has withheld from her since she shared with him the fruit of the Eden tree.

And this old sex-instinct, hidden away in the dim recesses at the back of Esther's mind, came to the front, and arraigned Westerham at the bar of her judgment. She was too proud to ask him for his affection, or even for his comradeship ; and, as a matter of fact, these were things which neither she nor any other has a right to ask. They are free gifts which none can claim. But in the depths of her soul she demanded of him—and she had a right to demand—his recognition of all that she had done and suffered on behalf of himself and his child. And even her meek and gentle spirit rebelled at the ingratitude which took this opportunity of showing her less consideration than he had ever shown her since first they met.

But of course she did not put all this into words—not even to herself ; but it seemed to her yet another proof of how wise she had been in refusing to marry

him. Even if she had married him, the same thing would have come to pass; he would have wearied of her age and her lack of charm, and his heart would instinctively have gone out to youth and beauty. And how much more parlous would her state have been then than now!

It was nearly a fortnight since Lord and Lady Westerham's little visit to the Dower House, and Wilfred had neither been to see Esther nor had written to her in the interval; when suddenly he made his appearance at Wyvern's End one afternoon when she was up there playing with Win. Esther was shocked to see how ill and worn Westerham looked, and at once asked after Beryl, fearing that he might have some cause for fresh anxiety. But he soon set her mind at rest on that score by assuring her—in the half-reverent, half-tender tone that he had lately always used when speaking of his beautiful young wife—that Beryl was in the best of health and spirits. Six months ago Esther would not have hesitated to ask him straight out what was worrying him, knowing that he would immediately respond to and be grateful for her affectionate sympathy: but he had of late raised up such a strong if impalpable barrier between himself and her, that she felt to intrude upon his thoughts and cares would be a liberty which she dared not take.

After a time he sent Win off with his nurse, and asked Esther if she could give him a few minutes' conversation: whereupon she readily acquiesced, and suggested that he should come and have tea with herself and her mother at the Dower House. But Wilfred curtly refused her invitation, as he said he must get back to town as quickly as possible. So Esther sat down by the library window, and calmly waited for him to speak.

"I want to consult you about Win's going to the seaside," he began in an abrupt, absent way, quite unlike his usual manner; "the doctors say he ought to go to the sea for a thorough change after such a long illness, and I don't quite see how to manage it."

Esther drew herself up. "Couldn't you and Beryl take him?" she asked rather coldly. "There is nothing for Beryl to be frightened of, for he is absolutely free from all possibility of infection now."

"Beryl isn't frightened; she has quite got over that: but, you see, she doesn't want to leave town just at the height of the season, and I don't think Win ought to wait on without a change till the end of July. Taylor says he is absolutely all right again, but he needs a change."

"I certainly shouldn't like him to go with only Nannie and the under-nurse in charge," said Esther firmly. "Nannie is most efficient and trustworthy, and absolutely devoted to Win; but the sole responsibility would be too much for her: I'm sure she wouldn't undertake it."

"No, I shouldn't like that, either," said Westerham: "I should be worrying about the little chap all the time."

"So should I," added the woman who loved Win quite as much as his father did. "Are you sure Beryl won't go?"

"She says not, and I shan't press her," replied Wilfred, with a look on his face that showed he did not mean to talk about Beryl's shortcomings.

"Then shall I take him?" asked Esther, who found it quite impossible to steel her heart for long against anyone who needed her. "It would do Mamma and me good to have a dose of sea air, and we should both love to have Baby with us."

Westerham's face lightened visibly. "Thank you, Esther, I knew you would say that. It is the thing that I should like above all others. I'm never really happy about the child except when he is with you."

His tone had become so friendly that Esther took courage. "And you'll run down and see us sometimes, won't you, Wilfred?"

The light died out of Westerham's face at once. "No, I can't," he answered abruptly.

Lady Esther drew herself up: her pride was up in arms at this unmerited rebuff, but it hid its armour under a velvet glove. She was far too well bred to show that she had even noticed Wilfred's ungraciousness, much less been hurt by it. So she deftly turned the conversation on to easier lines, and confined herself to discussing with Westerham the arrangements of the proposed seaside visit until his departure.

But the iron of his unkindness had entered into her very soul, and she felt that she could bear the pain of it no longer in silence, but must salve her wound with the balm of human sympathy. Consequently the next time that she found herself *en tête-à-tête* with her sister, she confided to the Duchess her distress at Wilfred's apparently unaccountable and unjustifiable conduct, and asked if her Grace could suggest any possible explanation of it.

Contrary to her custom the Duchess looked at Esther for some moments in silence, with an expression of mingled astonishment and tenderness in her blue eyes. Then she said: "My dear child, do you mean to tell me that you don't know?"

Esther was puzzled. "Don't know? What do you mean? What is it that I don't know, Eleanor? Surely I have done nothing to justify Wilfred in

turning against me, and being as disagreeable to me as he once used to be nice ! ”

Again the Duchess marvelled. Such innocence at Esther's age was beyond her comprehension ; and she felt it was time for enlightenment. “ My dear Esther, do you mean to tell me that you don't know that Westerham is in love with you ; and that what you call his disagreeableness is only a laudable attempt on his part to do the straight thing ? ”

Esther went as white as death, and stretched out her hands as if to ward off a blow. “ Hush, Eleanor, hush ! You don't know what you are saying. ”

“ Yes, I do ; and what's more, I've known it and wanted to say it for a long time, because I saw how difficult you and your stupendous innocence were making things for Westerham. He really has behaved very well, and is doing his level best to be a good husband to that irritating little idiot that you drove him into marrying : but your saintliness and your unselfishness and the rest of your bag of tricks have been almost too much for him, poor dear ! ”

Esther groaned, and hid her face in her hands. “ Oh, Eleanor, it isn't true ! It can't be true ! ” she cried. But her sister's calm way of stating the case carried conviction nevertheless.

The Duchess was very kind, but also very sensible. “ It is true, my dear, and therefore has to be faced ; and not only faced, but made the best of. As you know, it was against my judgment that you refused to marry Westerham, and rammed Beryl down his throat instead ; but now that she is down his throat she has got to stick there, and the easier you make it for him to swallow her the better. I detest her, and always have done so, and I don't feel it incumbent upon me to do otherwise ; but Westerham—poor fool !—has bound

himself by oaths to love and honour and cherish the selfish little thing, and he has got to do so whether he likes it or not; and you have got to stop making it impossible for him to do so."

After they had talked over the matter for some time, Esther lifted tear-filled, pleading eyes to her sister. "But I never thought it possible that he could come back to a faded old maid like me after loving a young and beautiful woman like Beryl. I never dreamed that he could care for me again—not in that way—after he had cared for her!"

The Duchess sighed. "My dear, you have ridden your youth-and-beauty hobby-horse to death! I'm the last woman to pretend that men aren't all more or less fools when a pretty face is concerned; but the folly is not necessarily chronic. After a while they find that a pretty face, with no heart or brains to back it up, won't wash. Unlike the rest of his ignorant but well-meaning sex," she continued with sisterly candour, "Westerham had the sense not to fall in love with a pretty face at first: and why you couldn't have let well—such exceptional well—alone, I never can imagine! What should you have thought of me if I'd refused Tammy because I thought he'd have found a deeper happiness in a Grecian nose, or a higher ecstasy in a golden head? I knew when I was well off—and when he was—and jumped at him: and we've been happy ever after."

"But what am I to do now?" asked Esther, wringing her hands. In the midst of her misery she felt Eleanor's cheery common sense was a sheet-anchor.

"I'm afraid that your duty now is quite plain and very unpleasant. You've got to see as little of Westerham as possible, and give him the chance—if he is virtuous and stupid enough to avail himself of it—of

falling in love again with that horrid little Beryl as soon as he can."

"And mayn't I even be friends with him?"

"Certainly not: that way danger lies. My dear," and the Duchess laid a loving hand on her sister's shoulder, "I'm afraid that that tiresome, overfed conscience of yours has been given something to cry for at last. At one time it was always trumping up imaginary jobs, and doing them to everybody's discomfort; but now it has got its work cut out for it—and pretty hard work too!"

CHAPTER VIII

GREAT DARKNESS

THEN followed a time of great darkness for Esther Wyvern. She felt as if an earthquake had shattered her world to ruins, and she herself stood desolate and broken-hearted amid the wreckage. After her first appeal to her sister that the friendship between herself and Lord Westerham should continue, she made no other; for she saw that Eleanor was right in her assumption that Wilfred and herself must be everything to each other or nothing: no middle course was possible between them.

But the inevitableness of the end of the companionship which had meant so much to her, was a source of great sorrow to Esther. She had felt it—felt it deeply—when she had seen that there was a gradual estrangement arising between herself and Wilfred; but she had comforted herself with the thought that it was only a phase, and that he would overlook her lack of beauty again, as he had overlooked it once before, and so things would once more be pleasant and easy between them. But now that she understood the reason of that apparent estrangement—understood that it was but a mask to hide the love which Wilfred had striven in vain to quench—she realized that the break between them was indeed final.

Moreover, the inevitable had happened with regard to her own feelings towards Westerham. Her certain knowledge of his love for her had awakened to

life her former love for him; and she knew that now mere friendship was as impossible to her as it was to him. Nevertheless she mourned the death of that friendship with all her heart.

But sorrow was not the hardest thing that Esther had to bear. There was something far worse than sorrow to a woman of her type; something which neither admitted of sorrow's alleviation nor of sorrow's consolation; and that was the consciousness of sin: an expression strange and unknown to modern ears, which are accustomed to be soothed by nebulous dogmas and indefinite dissertations on the tolerant good nature of a pantheistic Deity, but real enough to the old-fashioned Evangelical school in which Esther had been brought up. She did not attempt to gloss the thing over in the modern fashion, as some irresistible (and at bottom beautiful) instinct of Nature which she could not repress: nor, again, to dress it up as some exquisite spiritual craving, too refined for the ordinary human being to understand: no; she looked it full in the face and called it by the name by which it is called in the Ten Commandments; and loathed it and shrank from it and repudiated it accordingly.

She juggled with no up-to-date casuistry: to her the whole situation was hideously and horribly simple: she loved Westerham, and he loved her, and he was another woman's husband.

And even this was not the worst. What agonized her even more than her own sin was the fact that—through her—Wilfred had sinned also. She not only loved another woman's husband: she was responsible for the fact that the man whom she cared for more than for any other loved a woman who was not his wife. In order to understand what these considerations

meant to Esther, it is necessary to put aside the present toleration of an indulgence toward such lapses, and to regard the question as the Evangelicals regarded it some thirty or forty years ago, and as the Almighty, it may be presumed, regards it at the present day : as a matter which allows of no smoothing-over, but of which the prologue is "Thou shalt not," and the epilogue is "The second death."

And what to Esther was the most terrible thought of all was the knowledge that the whole thing—the sin and the sorrow of both Wilfred and herself—was entirely her own doing, and the consequence of her own action. She saw it clearly now—too late. She was too just a woman to fall into the common human error of laying to God's charge that which she had done herself ; of upbraiding the Almighty for willingly afflicting and grieving the children of men, when in reality the children of men were wilfully afflicting and grieving themselves. God had given her her heart's desire, and she had put it away from her in her spiritual pride. She had made a god of her own conscience, and set it up and worshipped it in place of Him Who had said, "Thou shalt have none other gods but Me." When He offered her the cup of sorrow she had been willing to drink it : but she had pushed His Hand aside when He put to her lips the cup of joy. She had forgotten that "Not as I will, but as Thou wilt" applies to everything—to happiness as well as to grief : the prayer was uttered in the Garden of Gethsemane, but was fulfilled in another garden at the dawn of Easter Day. Esther had learnt submission to God's Hand when it lay heavy upon her, but she had rebelled against it when it strove to lift her up. And the result of her rebellion was the result of all rebellion : sorrow and darkness as of the shadow of death.

But if her Evangelical training had taught her the nature of the disease, it had also shown her where the remedy was to be found. She knew her sin could be pardoned and washed away: but she also knew that it could not be condoned or glossed over. As she meditated upon the matter, and tried to master the lessons that life was teaching her, she saw that both she and Wilfred had been right in their apparently diverse views as to the Hellenic and the Hebraistic conceptions of life. The Jew and the Greek did not really preach opposing doctrines: they only set forth different facets of the one great jewel of truth. Wilfred had been right when he bid her take her happiness as the gift of God: and now she was right to turn her back upon happiness as the snare of the devil. Her mistake had been the old mistake of deciding for herself which of the fruits of the garden she might and might not eat. But now that at last she was willing to do the will, she knew the truth of the doctrine: she experienced no doubts as to what was right and what was wrong, as she had done before: her way was made plain before her face, with all its stones and its briars and its cold and lonely heights: and she knew that it must never, if she could help it, cross her lover's path again.

Of course—being a gentlewoman as well as a good woman—she recognized that nothing must be done which could cause misunderstanding or inconvenience or pain to other people. She and Westerham must learn so to conduct themselves before their acquaintances and the members of their respective households, that no one—most especially Beryl—should ever guess the true state of affairs: but all real companionship—all interchange of thought and community of interest—must cease between them from this time forth; and

they must only meet on those occasions when the keeping up of appearances and the sensibilities of those nearest and dearest to them demanded it.

It was very terrible, she felt, that this thing should have happened to her of all people: but she had the justice to admit—as many of us would admit if we only had the sense to perceive it—that her troubles were to a great extent her own fault. None the less easy to bear on that account, perhaps: but all the more necessary to be borne with patience and fortitude.

Lord Westerham, likewise, was very miserable—quite as miserable as Lady Esther. Although he had not the additional pang of feeling that it was his own doing, on the other hand he had none of her feminine power of endurance and of submission to the inevitable: and, moreover, he was younger than she, and had all youth's hunger for happiness. He did not in the least attempt to hug his grief, as Esther—being a woman—was perhaps prone to do: on the contrary, he tried his utmost to get over his misplaced affection, and to fan the ashes of his passion for his wife once more into flame. He dwelt persistently upon the thought and the sight of Beryl's beauty, and endeavoured to stir himself to fall in love with it once more. But all in vain. His passion for her—although intense while it lasted—had never risen above the physical plane: she possessed no intellectual gifts wherewith to enlist his friendship, nor spiritual ones whereby to compel his reverence. As a matter of fact, her society bored him as much as his bored her; and it would have been impossible even for any one who knew her much less thoroughly than did her husband, to feel any respect for her selfish, shallow character. For some men—perhaps for many men—her mere beauty would have been enough; but Westerham

asked for something more. He longed for a wife who would have the power not only to stir his senses, but also to stimulate his intellect and to elevate his soul; who would have continued to be his chosen companion and his highest inspiration after the days of youthful passion had passed away.

And it was undoubtedly hard upon him that—having originally possessed the wisdom to understand his soul's need and to choose the highest instead of the most outwardly attractive—Esther's conscience had not allowed him to ratify this wise choice. Of his own free will, and without first having to experience the unsatisfactory nature of an inferior selection, he *had* loved the highest when he saw it: and yet Esther had deliberately turned his eyes from the contemplation of the highest, and had compelled him to select the lower in its place. Surely here he had just cause for complaint. Yet he never blamed her, even in thought. He knew that her motive had been right even though her action had been wrong: and his three years' experience of his wife's absolute selfishness, had taught him to look with more than lenience on all who erred on the other side.

His only happiness now lay—as Esther's only happiness now lay—in the child whom they both adored: and they were fast learning the great lesson of Nature that it is the part of the older generation to stand on one side to make way for the generation which is yet for to come; that middle-aged men and women must cease to live or to think for themselves, but must live instead in the careers of those that are coming after them. And the learning of this lesson was necessarily much easier to Esther at forty-three than it was to Westerham at thirty-one.

But while Wilfred and Esther were eating the bread

and drinking the waters of affliction, Beryl was thoroughly enjoying herself. In the first place, she was in splendid health, and the delights of her rank and wealth had not yet lost all their novelty for her. Moreover, her husband was kinder and more indulgent to her than he had ever been. We are none of us ever so nice and agreeable to people as when *we* know that we are behaving badly to them, and *they* don't: and Lord Westerham was no exception to this rule. He was always trying to make up to Beryl for the wrong he had done her in ceasing to love her—to expiate in some way his lapse of marital duty in the spirit, by superabundantly fulfilling it in the letter. And the very fact that he had ceased to love her made it far easier for him now to be good-tempered and indulgent than it was in the days when her presence stirred him with passion and her absence with jealousy. As her indifference in times past had made her always pleasant and easy with him, so his indifference now made him pleasant and easy with her: and she was not clever enough to perceive the parallel between the two. In former days it used to cut him to the quick when she fell short of his ideal of motherhood: but now it did not matter to him in the least what she fell short of, for she and his ideals had ceased to have anything to do with one another. In former days it used to hurt him when she showed how little love she had for him: but now that he no longer loved her, he preferred that she should not care for him either. Her neglect of the boy was now rather a relief than a source of regret: for she had never taken proper care of the child's health, and was utterly incapable of training his mind. Esther fulfilled Wilfred's ideal of motherhood; Esther was almost always with Win; therefore Wilfred's mind was at rest about his son.

It had been arranged—much to the delight of old Lady Westerham and Esther—that the boy should have a suite of nurseries furnished at the Dower House, and spend his time there when his parents were not at Wyvern's End: and although that arrangement prevented Westerham from seeing as much of the child as he otherwise would have done (since seeing the boy involved seeing Esther also), he was so well content for Win to be under Esther's care and influence, that he put his own pleasure on one side.

And so the time passed on.

One November morning Esther was standing at the morning-room window looking over the park to the break in the belt of woods where the white façade of Wyvern's End filled the gap and dominated the whole landscape. And as she stood and looked at the dreary scene spread out before her eyes, a great weariness overwhelmed her spirit; that weariness which comes to all of us at some time or another, when the battle of life hardly seems worth while. She was tired—tired to the death—of fighting against her love for Wilfred, which, in spite of all her struggles to subdue it, still burned in her heart. She had done all she could; she had fought and suffered and prayed; she had put, as far as was feasible, Wilfred out of her life altogether, and never saw him if she could possibly prevent it; nevertheless the battle continued, and her constant warfare against the sin which so persistently beset her had wellnigh worn her out. Just at first the very enormity of the temptation which confronted her had braced her to withstand it: the sense of shock and excitement had borne her up. But long struggles—like long illnesses—are far the hardest to bear and the most difficult to relieve; and poor Esther's present strain promised to prove too much for her.

Moreover, she missed Wilfred far more than she had ever imagined that she would. As long as she thought that his fickleness was the cause of the coolness between them, her pride—of which, underneath her gentle exterior, she possessed no small share—had supported her : but now when she understood that the difficulty was not his fickleness but his faithfulness, her erstwhile support forsook her and fled. Her unselfishness likewise came to her aid as long as she believed that Wilfred was happy although she was not : but her realization of the fact that he was every whit as wretched as she was, robbed her even of that consolation.

Every way she turned there seemed nothing but misery : and the fact that the misery was all of her own making rendered it none the less easy to endure. And there seemed so much of it, too ; such an endless vista of dark and dreary days stretched out before her mental vision. She was not really old after all ; only forty-four ; and the prospect of another thirty years or more, wherein all the tomorrows should be as today, simply appalled her. Her spirit shrank from the mere contemplation of it.

Of course there was Win—dear little Win, who at that moment was out driving in the pony-cart with her mother : but the wave of depression that rushed over her was so dark and so deep that even the thought of Win failed for the moment to comfort her.

A nameless horror was upon her—a horror of thick darkness and the shadow of death—which seemed to presage and to portend something more dreadful still. She felt as if some trouble, some terrible event, was about to happen. The whole of her spiritual outlook was enveloped in that weird and lurid gloom which

we sometimes see in the physical world just before a terrific storm.

And as she stood and trembled, the storm broke.

Perkins came into the room—as was usual about this time—to bring in the morning paper: but the moment Esther saw his face she knew that something terrible had happened. He held the paper tightly in his shaking hand, and his face was livid and lined.

“What is it, Perkins?” she asked quickly.

The butler’s voice trembled so that he could hardly articulate. “Excuse me, my lady—but there’s bad news—dreadful bad news—about his lordship.”

Esther stood calm in the clutches of despair. “Tell me the worst, Perkins. Is he dead?”

Perkins could not speak, but handed her the paper, pointing with a trembling finger to a sensational paragraph headed—

“DREADFUL MOTOR ACCIDENT

“The Earl and Countess of Westerham killed on the Spot.”

CHAPTER IX

THE CUTTING OF THE KNOT

FOR a moment Esther stood stunned by the shock. Then her nature reasserted itself, and as usual she thought of others rather than of herself.

"Her ladyship, Perkins!" she exclaimed. "She must not hear of this suddenly—it will be too much for her—no one must break it to her except me. I must tell her—and Lord Winfieldale—myself."

Perkins by this time was fairly crying. "Her ladyship has gone in the pony-cart—with his lordship—round by Grotham to Severnashe: they won't be back for an hour-and-a-half or two hours," he sobbed.

"Then let no one tell them anything when they come in. See to this yourself, Perkins. I dread the effect of such a shock upon her ladyship."

"I'll see to it, my lady—you can trust me. But won't your ladyship take something yourself—a little brandy or something—or shall I send Clark to your ladyship?"

But the dignity of a great sorrow had fallen upon Esther. She was set apart from her fellows, and utterly beyond their help. "No, thank you, Perkins: I am quite all right. Please leave me alone now; but be sure to tell me when you see her ladyship and the pony-cart coming over the hill, and I'll meet her and break it to her."

It went to Perkins's faithful heart to leave alone in

her sorrow the mistress whom he had served from the time that she was a little child : but when Lady Esther spoke in that tone nobody dared to disobey her. So Perkins went away, weeping audibly.

But Esther did not weep. She was past weeping. She sat very still, and tried to realize the blow that had fallen upon her : and with the realization there came a great calm.

For the Help that no man knows save he that receiveth it, was, in her hour of need, vouchsafed to her : and her soul stood upright and was not afraid.

First, she was conscious of a strange feeling of exaltation in that the worst had happened and she had been able to bear it ; and yet not she, but that Power within her, Which she used to call Religion, but Which she now knew to be Christ. Once again she experienced that sense of His all-pervading Presence which makes us feel that even death itself is only a means of closer communion with Him ; and that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers shall be able to separate us from His Love.

And with this wonderful sense of the Presence of Christ and of the unity of all things in Him, there came into Esther's soul a sense of relief—nay, almost of gladness—that now she and Wilfred need no longer struggle against their love for one another. It had ceased to be a sin : it had become once more the joy of their lives, and a joy which no man could take from them. The twain whom man could not put asunder had been put asunder by God : the troth, "till death us do part," had served its full sentence, and had come to its final end. The bond between Beryl and

Wilfred, so indissoluble in life, had by death been finally dissolved: and Esther's heart throbbed with joy at the thought that Wilfred was hers once more. Death had not taken him away, but had in reality given him back to her. He was once more hers, as he could never have been while he was Beryl's husband: and she vowed that the rest of her life should be spent in training his son in the way that Wilfred would wish him to go.

Esther was surprised—as perhaps most of us are surprised at least once in our lives—at the strange way Death sometimes has of giving back to us our loved ones instead of taking them away. Those who in life have gradually been separated from us by distance, or estrangement, or misunderstanding, or by the absorption of bodily affliction or the dulling effects of old age, pass over to the Other Side; and once again we feel they are our own, nearer and dearer than they ever were, and in the full zenith of their health and powers. They are not only ours once more, but ours at their best. And this not in any mystical or transcendental sense, such as is expressed in those most hopeless and depressing of all hopeless and depressing lines, "To live in hearts we love, is not to die." If our dear ones only live in the hearts they leave behind, then indeed they are dead, and we are of all men most miserable. Our faith and our preaching have been alike vain.

But we mean—we know—something infinitely more than this when we realize that Death has given them back to us: we mean that they are alive as they never were alive before, and that Death only came that they might have Life, and might have it more abundantly. This is the knowledge that we have concerning them.

And the seal of that knowledge is the same as that wherewith we sealed the stone of their sepulchre, which the Angel of the Resurrection shall one day roll away. On the one side of the seal runs the legend, "For as in Adam all die "; and on the other, "Even so in Christ shall all be made alive."

So the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, filled the soul of Esther Wyvern as she stood by the window that autumn morning and thought over the news of Wilfred's death. She felt that the worst had happened, and that in Christ's strength she had survived it; and so nothing could ever hurt her any more.

And as she stood wrapped in this ineffable calm, she was suddenly aroused by the sound of wheels coming up the drive.

"There is Mamma," she said to herself. "I must go and break the news to her and to Win." And it struck her as strange that there was anybody to whom the news had yet to be broken. To her it seemed that Wilfred and Beryl had been dead for ages and ages: she felt she could hardly remember the time when they had been alive, it was so long ago.

But when she went into the hall to meet her mother she found that she had been mistaken: the sound she had heard was not the pony-cart, but the bicycle of a telegraph boy. Perkins gave her the orange envelope, and she opened it mechanically: in the agony that had swept over her head since she heard of Wilfred's death, she had learned that—since the worst had happened—nothing could ever matter again. To all intents and purposes she felt she had died with him.

But again she was mistaken.

The telegram was from a doctor in the town near to which the fatal accident had taken place: and it ran thus—

“Bad motor accident. Lady Westerham killed instantaneously. Lord Westerham alive, but still unconscious. Good hopes entertained of his recovery.”

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

A YEAR after the events narrated in the last chapter, the Duchess of Mershire sat at tea with her mother at the Dower House of Wyvern's End.

"Of course it will be a very quiet wedding," said Lady Westerham; "Esther wishes this, and I am sure she is right in so doing."

The Duchess nodded. "Yes; I suppose that Esther has got beyond the white-satin-and-orange-blossom age, and entered the period of travelling dress and hat to match. But I cannot help regretting it. I always feel that white satin and orange-blossom are things that leave their satisfactory mark upon one for the rest of one's life—like vaccination, don't you know?"

"It was not Esther's age that I was thinking of, my dear, but poor Beryl."

The Duchess laughed. "Well, Mamma, if Beryl hadn't died I certainly should never have suggested white satin and orange-blossom for Esther: I should have thought them even more unsuitable than I do now!"

"You know what I mean, my love," Lady Westerham was gently reproving.

"Perfectly: it is only what you say that is so funny."

"I'm sure I did not mean to be funny, Eleanor."

The Duchess laughed again. "Of course you didn't: and that's why you were."

Lady Westerham smiled indulgently at her daughter's high spirits. When Eleanor's jokes were in question, she did not understand—she loved. Then she said: "I hope that dear Esther will be very happy. At any rate, she deserves to be."

"I'm sure she will, Mamma; but I don't at all agree with you that she deserves to be. As a matter of fact, I know no one who deserves it less. Why on earth couldn't she marry Westerham when first he asked her, and so save all that tiresome Beryl episode?"

Once more Lady Westerham gently reproved her firstborn. "My love, I think you forget that poor dear Beryl is dead."

"No, Mamma, I don't, or I shouldn't refer to her as an episode. But I must say that I blame Esther now, as I have done all along."

"My dear, you have no right to do so. Esther did what she thought her duty to Wilfred in refusing him when he was so young and inexperienced."

"Then more fool she! I only wish I'd had the chance of refusing Tammy when he was young and inexperienced! Of course I shouldn't have availed myself of it, but it would have made married life much easier for me."

"Still, it was beautifully unselfish of dear Esther," persisted the devoted mother.

"It's a great mistake to be unselfish when you are dealing with a man: you might just as well be sympathetic when you are dealing with a thunderstorm. It's the right virtue in the wrong place. Now what

should you have thought of me if I'd been as unselfish as Esther, and begged Tammy to go further and fare worse in the clutches of some idiotic woman who was four times as good-looking as I, and not a quarter as clever? It would have made life dreadfully dull for him : and it would have been most unfair to the boys, too, to give them a fool for a mother, instead of brilliant, sensible me. Think how stupid they might have been, with Tammy's solid stodge, and none of my wit to lighten it ! ”

“ Ah, there you have it, my love ! ” said Lady Westerham : “ you have put your finger on the core of the matter, when you talk of the boys. Think of Win. ”

“ Yes, of course, there's the child, ” admitted the Duchess grudgingly.

“ Perhaps dear Esther did make a mistake, ” continued her mother ; “ but if so, she did it from the best motives, and she is certainly among those loving ones for whom it is written that all things work together for good. We may tangle the threads of life through our ignorance and clumsiness ; but if we only err through ignorance and clumsiness, and not by evil intention, there is One Who will take the tangled threads out of our tired hands and weave them into a perfect pattern of palm-leaves and cherubim and open flowers. It makes me very happy to think that Esther and Wilfred are to be married at last : but it makes me still happier to think that the name and the family will not die out, but that dear little Win will carry them on and be as good a man, please God, as his father and your father have been before him. ”

The Duchess shrugged her shoulders. “ Mamma,

I do believe that you think the whole universe centres in Win."

"So it does, my dear; just as it centres in Jocko and Archie. It always centres in the children, and the children's children, and always will."

THE END

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